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The Israel Defense Forces and the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*:
When Tactical Virtuosity Meets Strategic
Disappointment.

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The Israel Defense Forces and the Al-Aqsa Intifada: When Tactical Virtuosity Meets Strategic Disappointment.

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Abstract

The following paper analyzes the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) counter-insurgency strategy and campaign carried out against the Palestinian insurgency within the Occupied/Disputed Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* (2000-2005). It provides a detailed examination of the tactics, operations and strategic effect that actions carried out by the Israel Defense Forces had on the overall conflict dynamic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The paper argues that while the IDF was able to achieve quite significant tactical innovation and success, the overall strategic result of Israel's counter-insurgency campaign during the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* was a stalemate rather than 'victory' given that, in effect, clear political goals and direction were lacking during the conflict.

Keywords

The Israel Defense Forces and the Al-Aqsa Intifada: When Tactical Virtuosity Meets Strategic Disappointment.

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Introduction

The following paper will analyze the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) counter-insurgency strategy and campaign within the Occupied/Disputed Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip,[1] with particular reference to the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, which began in September 2000 and petered out towards the end of 2005[2]. This paper will argue that although the IDF was able to obtain quite significant tactical achievements, such tactical success did not ultimately achieve a strategic decision or victory vis-à-vis the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The IDF's campaign, in fact, until late 2004 managed to galvanize rather than diminish Palestinian terrorist and guerrilla activity. While Israel's stated goal was to achieve a 'victory' over the Palestinian insurgency, the most the IDF could obtain was a reduction of Palestinian insurgency and terrorist capabilities, but not, in effect, of Palestinian motivation to keep on fighting the Israeli occupation of the Territories. An important factor in determining this lack of success has been Israel's inability to tie its political goals and overall strategy with the use of the IDF. Thus, IDF counter-insurgency activity over the last six years has only postponed a further round of hostilities.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been an enduring feature of the Middle East region since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Prior to the establishment of the state of Israel and, particularly, over the last twenty years the Arab-Israeli conflict has manifested itself mostly as an intercommunal, rather than inter-state, conflict between the state of Israel and the Palestinian population situated within the Occupied/Disputed Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

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[1] Henceforth, 'Territories'.

[2] For a comprehensive analysis of the IDF's conduct during the *Intifadas*, see: Sergio Catignani, *Israeli Counter-Insurgency and the Intifadas: Dilemmas of a Conventional Army* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Economic deprivation, deep-seated anger and frustration borne out of living under the twenty-year Israeli occupation as well as the awareness that no outside intervention was forthcoming (given the Palestinian Liberation Organization's defeat and exile from Lebanon in the mid-1980s), led local Palestinians to take matters into their own hands. In December 1987, a spontaneous popular uprising, known as the *Intifada*, broke out in the Territories as a form of protest against the Israeli occupation of the Territories. The low-key yet widespread nature of the violence used and the defiance shown by the Palestinian civilian population – for example, strikes, large-scale demonstrations, barricades, and stone-throwing – proved problematic for the IDF. The highly asymmetric nature of the struggle between the local Palestinian population and the IDF enabled the Palestinians to gain widespread international sympathy. The IDF, which until then had been accustomed to conducting major conventional military warfare and Special Forces counter-terrorist operations, had been unprepared to confront, mainly through constabulary missions, a civilian-based uprising.

Cases of excessive force, abuse, innocent civilian fatalities being broadcast around the world due to the pervasive media coverage surrounding the uprising eroded within Israel the national security consensus regarding the need to preserve the occupation of the Territories. Until then the occupation had been inexpensive and relatively unproblematic. However, with demoralization within the IDF ranks, due to the IDF's inability to suppress the uprising and due to the ethical dilemmas and operational blunders it experienced, as well as the spiralling manpower and financial costs associated with the constant deployment of forces, Israel had concluded that an exclusively military solution to the *Intifada* was unobtainable.

Thus, the September 1993 Oslo Peace Accords proved to be a watershed in Israeli-Palestinian relations as they were seen to be the first step towards a two-state solution to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Israel recognized the Palestinians' right to self-government, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), as the official representative of the Palestinians, recognized Israel's right to exist in peace and security. A five-year interim process was set up in order to relinquish gradually land as well as internal security and administrative duties to the newly formed Palestinian Authority (PA) under the leadership of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

However, the disparity between Israel's and the PA's positions regarding the final status issues (e.g., Jerusalem, refugees, borders, etc.) became only too obvious at the Camp David talks in July 2000. Prime Minister Ehud Barak could not believe that Arafat could reject Israel's generous peace offer. Disillusionment with Arafat's lack of flexibility and, in Barak's as well as in US President Bill Clinton's eyes, goodwill during the final status talks led to a series of mutual recriminations.[3] In spite of further Israeli concessions during talks at Taba in December 2000, increasing Palestinian violence and Israeli reprisals finally led to the complete breakdown of the Oslo peace process.

The *Al-Aqsa Intifada*

According to PA Communications Minister Imad Falouji, Arafat decided to initiate a violent uprising, similar to the first *Intifada*, following the failed Camp David

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[3] See: Ahron Bregman, *Elusive Peace: How the Holy Land Defeated America* (London: Penguin, 2005).

talks.[4] By resorting to violence Arafat possibly sought to pressure Israel to make further concessions (as had indeed occurred at Taba) or to even 'internationalize' the conflict by encouraging some form of international, rather than merely US-led, peace process and possible intervention. The purported pretext that led to the onset of large-scale violence arose from *Likud* opposition leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount on 28 September 2000. Despite the fact that Ariel Sharon had been permitted by Israel's Internal Security Minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami, to visit the Temple Mount following assurances given by Palestinian security chief Jabril Rajoub that as long as Sharon did not enter the *Al-Aqsa* Mosque the visit would not create any problems, violence broke out. Even though the initial wave of violent rioting was spontaneous, by 29 September the PA's official radio station, 'Voice of Palestine', was exhorting Palestinians to rise up and defend the *Al-Aqsa* Mosque. The *Al-Aqsa Intifada* had begun.[5]

Arafat's calculations of trying to obtain maximum diplomatic gains through the unleashing of limited Palestinian violence, however, backfired. Unorganized popular unrest gradually converged into an organized popular resistance often involving guerrilla tactics led by *Hamas*, Palestinian Islamic *Jihad* (PIJ), and PLO-affiliated militias, *Fatah Tanzim* and Force-17.[6] These groups now controlled the Palestinian street and escalated the crisis.

During the first three months, while traditional riots continued to disrupt daily living in the Territories, Palestinian terrorism began taking on the form of gunmen firing on Israeli vehicles in the Territories,[7] the assassination of Israelis within the areas under PA jurisdiction or the ambush of IDF soldiers. The placement of roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on roads leading to settlements was especially lethal. On 20 November, for example, a roadside bomb killed two Israeli adults and severely injured seven children on their way to school.

Initial IDF Reactions: 'Containment Policy'

Following further attacks, the IDF began to build by-pass roads to both settlements and cities within the reach of Palestinian sniper fire. This development aimed at diminishing the friction with Palestinians as well as at compelling Palestinian gunmen to leave their towns in order to execute attacks in the open and, thus, raise the likelihood of suffering a successful IDF retaliatory strike. Recurrent shootings against settlements and Israeli urban areas close to the 1967 Green Line as well as the successful infiltration of Palestinian suicide bombers into Israel were the main motivating factors leading to the construction of the 'security fence' around parts of the West Bank as shall be seen below.

During the initial stages of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, when Palestinian violence was predominantly centered on rioting, the IDF functioned very efficiently and suffered no

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[4] See: '*Al-Aqsa Intifada* Reportedly Planned in July', *Intelligence Briefs: Israel/Palestinians*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (March 2001), <u>Middle East Intelligence Bulletin</u>, <http://www.meib.org/articles/0103_ipb.htm>, accessed 12 May 2007.

[5] This paper will focus its analysis on the IDF's counter-insurgency campaign during the first four years of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* as this period comprises the most critical and violent phase of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For a detailed timeline of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* see: 'Middle East Timeline', <u>Guardian</u>, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,,554625,00.html>, accessed 25 June 2006.

[6] On Palestinian strategy and tactics see: Hillel Frisch, 'Debating Palestinian Strategy in the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 61-80.

[7] The Gaza settlement of Netzarim, for example was denied vehicular access for almost three weeks in October 2000 given Palestinian gunfire.

casualties as troops operated according to precise drills and under clear-cut rules of engagement (ROE). Anti-riot ROE required IDF units to adopt the gradual use of non-lethal weapons, such as stun grenades, tear gas, and rubber-coated plastic bullets, which did cause harm, though, if shot within the maximum stand-off combat ranges (100-150 meters).[8] However, once *Tanzim*, *Hamas*, and other gunmen began firing from within these rioting crowds, the IDF began returning live fire, civilian casualties and deaths could not be avoided. Consequently, from early on in the conflict Israel was blamed for using excessive firepower against the Palestinians despite its attempts to avoid such a situation. This problem was highlighted by then IDF Head of Operations, Major General Giora Eiland, who defended the IDF's conduct in a letter to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel by arguing that 'the Palestinians make deliberate use of children, with the clear aim of increasing the number of casualties. We have here a bizarre situation whereby the other side is actually trying to increase its casualties. There is a limit to our ability to prevent them from achieving their desired aim'.[9] Nevertheless, given the amount of ammunition spent during the initial months of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, it is hard to figure out to what extent the IDF was genuinely intent in limiting its retaliatory fire.[10]

Even though Barak had become disenchanted by Arafat's refusal of his offers at Camp David and Taba, he believed that an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement could be achieved. Hence, Israeli policy-makers decided to adopt initially a strategy of 'containment' vis-à-vis this new round of conflict. Such a strategy would guarantee a restrained military response that would in turn allow negotiations to carry on, deny in any case the Palestinians from achieving any political benefits through the use of violence and still continue to provide security to Israeli citizens. However, the IDF found it difficult to implement this policy of 'containment' at the operational and tactical levels. In response to increasing gunfire aimed at Israeli citizens, thruways and neighborhoods, such as the Gilo neighborhood in southern Jerusalem, the IDF began hitting the Palestinian areas from where the attacks were initiated with helicopter and fixed-wing air-strikes, machine-gun fire, and tank main gun rounds.

The IDF set various limitations to its activities along the lines of the 'containment' policy. For the most part during the initial months of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, it did not initiate operations, but retaliated to Palestinian violence. It typically did not operate within the Palestinian-controlled 'A' areas in order to respect the PA's 'sovereignty' in these areas, except when carrying out limited surgical strikes. Finally, the IDF in principle attempted to retaliate in proportion to the Israeli-perceived severity of the Palestinian attack. However, due to the distance that often existed between Palestinian terrorists who systematically operated from Palestinian civilian quarters and IDF units deployed outside the PA 'A' areas, the IDF was often forced to resort to stand-off weapon attacks that, despite the fact that they mostly involved precision-guided munitions, resulted occasionally in collateral damage and civilian deaths.

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[8] David Eshel, 'The *Al-Aqsa Intifada*: Tactics and Strategies', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (May 2001), pp. 36-8.

[9] Quoted from: Shaul Shay and Yoram Schweitzer, 'The *Al-Aqsa Intifada*: Palestinian-Israeli Confrontation', 4 April 2001, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, <http://www.ict.org.il/apage/5363.php>, accessed 10 May 2007.

[10] Col. Yossi Kupperwaser, at the time a Central Command intelligence officer, stated that the IDF shot, during the initial months of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, over 850,000 5.56mm bullets – 1.3 million bullets when including the Gaza Strip. See: Akiva Eldar, 'Popular Misconceptions', *Ha'aretz*, 11 June 2004; and Reuven Peatzur, 'More than a Million Bullets', *Ha'aretz*, 29 June 2004.

The IDF aimed at precluding such incidents due to the negative moral and media fallout that these errors involved, but nonetheless was not willing to let Palestinian militants operate with impunity as well as jeopardize the safety of its own troops. Then head of IDF's Armored Corps, Brig.-Gen. Avigdor Klein reiterated this by stating that,

> 'my mission is to prevent the Palestinians from achieving political goals through violence….
> And since we face numerous threats each day from terrorists willing to die, we're not going to
> risk the safety of our troops in attempts to look better in front of the news cameras.'[11]

The IDF's Operational Assertiveness

As a result of increasing Palestinian violence, the IDF discarded the option of upholding to the letter the Israeli government's containment policy. Consequently, one can argue that the IDF played a part in escalating the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* towards the end of 2000. Even though the IDF declared that it had adopted a restrained reaction to Palestinian violence, casualties quickly mounted up on the Palestinian side. By the end of the year, 327 Palestinians had been killed and around 1,040 had been wounded.[12] While the Barak government had hoped to limit any escalation of the conflict in order to achieve a political agreement with the PA, following the growing spate of lethal Palestinian terror and guerrilla attacks the IDF General Staff had made up its mind and declared publicly that the PA had no real peaceful intentions towards Israel and that the IDF would pursue all necessary means to achieve 'victory'. In a widely read national newspaper, *Yediot Ahronot*, the IDF General Staff was quoted as stating that, 'The IDF intends to win in this encounter. It is not ready to allow the political echelon, with its contradictory orders and other considerations, to dim its victory'.[13] The newly appointed Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Moshe Yaalon reiterated Israel's strategic goal of wanting to defeat Palestinian terrorism by stating later on in August 2002 that, 'the only solution is to achieve an unequivocal victory over the Palestinians.'[14]

The disparity between Barak's and the IDF's stated strategies soured Israeli civil-military relations, but such tensions proved to be short-lived once Ariel Sharon got elected as Israel's new prime minister in February 2001. Fed up with Barak's peace concessions under fire, the Israeli population opted to elect Sharon, who was known for his hard line stance vis-à-vis Palestinian terrorism and nationalist aspirations.

And yet, during the initial phase of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* Arafat, despite all his faults, did make an effort, albeit a half-hearted one, to reduce the intensity of Palestinian attacks, which were by late 2001 escalating beyond control due to *Hamas*' and PIJ's growing participation in the conflict. The IDF carried out, nonetheless, in December 2001, and despite the existence of a shaky Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire agreement, the targeted killing of Raed Karmi, a local *Tanzim* leader. The effect of his assassination galvanized *Fatah* and led it to collaborate with other terrorist groups.[15] The *Al-Aqsa*

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[11] Barbara Opall-Rome, 'Tanks fill wider role in Israel's anti-terror war', *Defense News*, 17 March 2003.

[12] Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov *et al*, *The Israeli-Palestinian Violent Confrontation 2000-2004: From Conflict Resolution to Conflict Management* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 2005), p. 25.
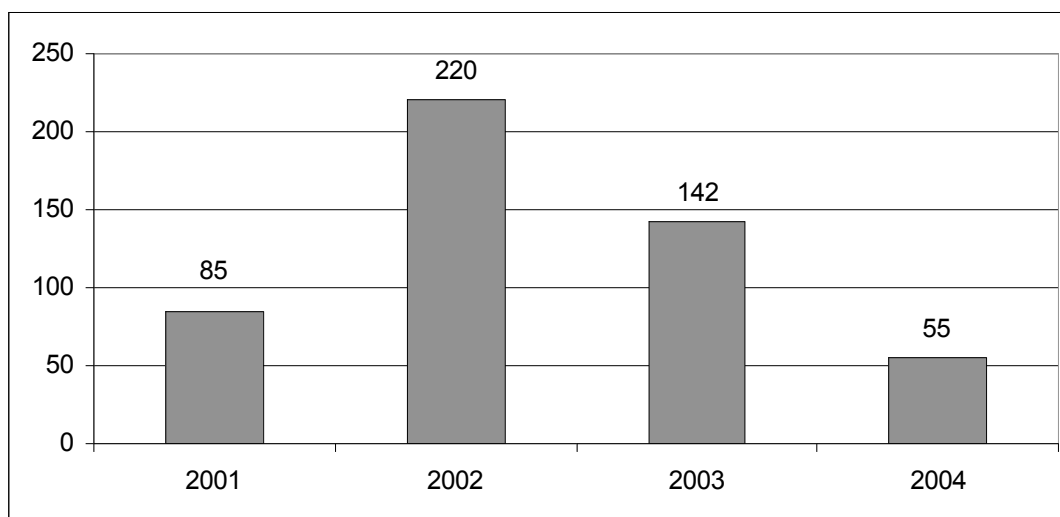
[13] Ofer Shelach cited in Yoram Peri, *The Israeli Military and Israel's Palestinian Policy: From Oslo to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, Peaceworks no. 47* (Washington, D.C.: *United States Institute from Peace*, November 2002), p. 35.

[14] Rami Hazut, 'The Palestinians Are an Existential Threat: Iraq Is Not', *Yediot Ahronot*, 23 August 2002, *Israel Resource Review*, <http://israelvisit.co.il/cgi-bin/friendly.pl?url=Aug-23-02!IDF>, accessed 14 March 2003.

[15] See: Amos Harel, 'MI: Arafat Steps Up Actions against Terrorist Organizations', *Ha'aretz*, 1 January 2002.

Martyrs Brigade declared, in fact, that as a result of the targeted killing, 'the so-called cease-fire is canceled.… With your assassination of Raed Karmi, you have opened hell on yourselves. You will be burned by its fire'.[16] Such 'fire' came in 2002 in the semblance of a deadly surge of terror attacks [See Figure 1].

Figure 1 – Israeli Victims of Palestinian Suicide Terror Attacks

Source: 'Ebb and Flow: A Summary of 2004', 19 April 2005, IDF Spokesperson's Office, <http://www1.idf.il/SIP_STORAGE/DOVER/files/6/37876.pdf>, accessed 19 April 2005.

The IDF's Second Phase of COIN: Punishing the PA

With the negotiations deadlocked and the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* characterized by the IDF upper echelon commanders and Israeli politicians, including Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, as a 'war', Israel's strategic policy changed from containment to the direct targeting of the PA, which came to be seen as directly responsible for the violence, often perpetrated by terrorist organizations, which it indeed supported and associated with as the conflict progressed. This close association with and support of terrorist attacks perpetrated by members of *Fatah*-affiliated *Tanzim* and the *Al-Aqsa* Martyrs Brigades as well as *Hamas* and the PIJ were corroborated by the seizure of major weapons shipments in 2001 and 2002.[17] Such intercepted shipments and the subsequent seizure of documents seriously implicated the PA of substantial financial, intelligence and operational assistance towards terrorist activities aimed at Israel.[18] Yasser Arafat's credibility as a peace partner had been shattered by this time.

The main strategic goal during this second phase of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* was to

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[16] 'Soldier killed following terrorist's death. Al-Aksa Brigade claims shooting near Tulkarm, says cease-fire is over', 15 January 2002, *Jerusalem Post*, <http://info.jpost.com/C002/Supplements/CasualtiesOfWar/2002_01_14.html>, accessed 2 February 2002.

[17] These weapons, transported on the Santorini and Karine-A merchant vessels, were intercepted by Israeli forces. See: 'Weapons Found on "Karine-A" and "Santorini"', 20 July 2002, War Online, <http://www.waronlineorg/en/analysis/pal_weapons.htm>, accessed 20 January 2005.

[18] See: Clive Jones, '"One Size Fits All: Israel, Intelligence, and the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (July-August 2003=, pp. 273-88.

'burn into the consciousness of the Palestinian side, that there is no chance of gaining achievements with terror and of forcing Israel to surrender…. If this struggle ends with terror having produced achievements for the Palestinians we will find ourselves on a slippery slope in terms of our deterrence….'[19]

Consequently, a much heavier military approach was adopted in order to stifle the growing Palestinian terrorist threat. Real diplomatic initiatives by now were, thus, not considered seriously and Israel began to focus on a much more military-oriented counter-insurgency strategy.

Israel Air Force (IAF) air strikes (and sea-based strikes along the Gaza Strip) increased considerably and were mostly targeted against PA security and governmental installations as well as ammunition warehouses in order to punish the PA for supporting the uprising and terror/guerrilla campaign. While the IAF air campaign enabled Israel to degrade effectively the PA's military infrastructure, it was far less successful in eliminating potential suicide bombers, which the IDF dubbed as 'ticking bombs'. The decisions to use stand-off precision weapon systems was often chosen in order to reduce Israeli casualties and at least until March 2002 enabled the IDF to retaliate to Palestinian violence without violating the PA's areas of jurisdiction. It, however, allowed the Palestinians to take political advantage of the IDF's public display of use of force by condemning its attacks as disproportionate.

As a result of negative media exposure from such high profile attacks, the IDF by November 2000 began combining the use of airpower and standoff weapon attacks with special covert counter-terrorist/guerrilla raids aimed at either arresting or eliminating suspected terrorists without having to expose the IDF to media scrutiny. These operations came to be known as 'low-signature' missions.[20] Most land raids were conducted by the special *Sayerot* (reconnaissance) infantry, paratrooper and Special Forces units. They were also carried out by the specialist *Mistar'aravim* ('to become an Arab') undercover hit squads.[21] Yet, each targeted killing carried out either by air or by land seemed to encourage, rather than deter, the recruitment of new volunteers and martyrs.[22] By early 2001, *Hamas* and PIJ had fully resumed suicide terror bombings within Israel itself.

Coercive economic measures were also enacted in order to pressure the PA into restraining Palestinian militants and terrorists. Once these proved ineffective they were, nevertheless, prolonged as a means of punishing the PA for its collaboration with terrorist groups. Income tax was withheld indefinitely. The periodic closure of the Territories, which inhibited Palestinian workers from entering Israel as well as the transfer of goods between the Territories and Israel, was also used as a punitive economic measure against the PA.

Once Palestinian terrorists began carrying out terror attacks within Israel the closure of the Territories as well as the imposition of long curfews on Palestinian villages, towns and cities came to be seen as a strategic necessity in order to stop the

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[19] 'Israel Chief of Staff Speaks His Mind', IsraelBehindTheNews.com, 23 August 2002, <http://israelvisit.co.il/cgi-bin/friendly.pl?url=Aug-23-02!IDF>, accessed 1 May 2007.
[20] See: Gal Hirsh, 'On Dinosaurs and Hornets: A Critical View on Operational Moulds in Asymmetric Conflict', *RUSI Journal* (August 2003), pp. 60-3.
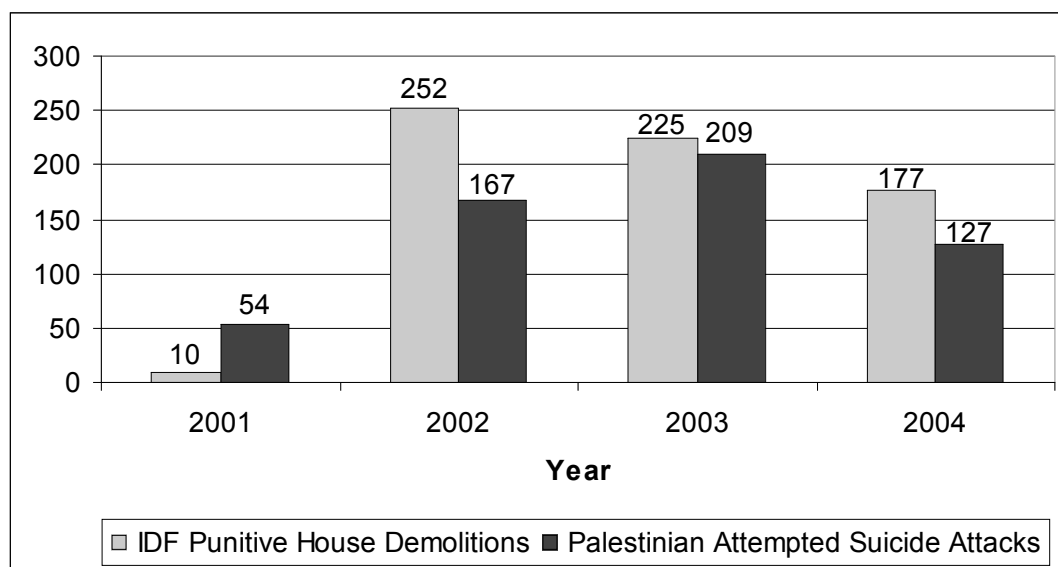[21] For a detailed overview of these and other units and of their operational capabilities see: <www.isayeret.com>.
[22] See: Edward H. Kaplan *et al*, 'What Happened to Suicide Bombings in Israel? Insights from a Terror Stock Model', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (May 2005), pp. 225-35.

infiltration of additional Palestinian terrorists into Israel or Israeli settlements within the Territories. Access routes to various Palestinian towns were also placed under the IDF's control. These population control measures, together with the creation of numerous checkpoints at border crossings and within the Territories, also served the purpose of facilitating the IDF's and the Israeli secret services' (*Shin Bet*) freedom of movement within the Territories in the former case as well as the execution of preventive operations such as intelligence collection, search and arrest or targeted killing missions in the latter case.

The decision to demolish housing belonging to families of terrorists was also taken as the IDF saw such a measure as a major deterrent against further terrorist activity given that, according to a senior IDF officer, 'demolishing a house is a grave penalty for the family. It is not merely an economic blow. A home has emotional value which cannot be restored'.[23] And yet, according to Zuhair Kurdi, a journalist with Hebron's *Al Amal* TV station, house demolitions and other IDF preventive or punitive measures had the opposite effect. Zuhair, in fact, argued that 'the legal father of the suicide bomber is the Israeli checkpoint, while his mother is the house demolition'.[24] Indeed, despite the growing use of such house demolitions, Palestinians did not really seem to be deterred from, but rather roused into conducting further attacks on Israel [See Figure 2].

Figure 2 – IDF House Demolitions: A Deterrent to Palestinian Suicide Bomb Attempts?

Source: 'Statistics on punitive house demolitions', *Bt'Selem*,
<http://www.btselem.org/english/Punitive_Demolitions/Statistics.asp>, accessed 22 May 2005, Ebb and Flow: A Summary of 2004', 19 April 2005, IDF Spokesperson's Office,
<http://www1.idf.il/SIP_STORAGE/DOVER/files/6/37876.pdf>, accessed 19 April 2005.

Moreover, as a result of Israel's punitive economic as well as the IDF's population control measures, Palestinian living standards, which were already low, deteriorated substantially. By early 2002, Palestinian areas, principally refugee camps

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[23] Amos Harel, 'Razing terrorists' houses is effective, army says', *Ha'aretz*, 9 December 2002.
[24] Matthew Gutman, 'Destruction, Constructively Speaking', *Jerusalem Post*, 9 January 2003.

were more dependent than ever on humanitarian aid. Although the IDF attempted to alleviate the burgeoning humanitarian problems in the Territories by allowing the distribution of aid and the periodic lifting of curfews and closures, very often such momentary respites would be used by Palestinian terrorists to shift weapons and other materiel in or around the Territories or actually infiltrate another suicide bomber into Israel who would then carry out an attack against Israeli civilians in buses, cafes, markets and other crowded public places.

The IDF was trying, thus, to solve the dilemma of whether or not to continue imposing indiscriminate population control measures that had negative humanitarian consequences, evidently alienated the local civilian population and exposed Israel to further domestic and international opprobrium, but seemed effective at sparing Israeli lives from the horrors of further suicide bombing attacks. Former Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, Major General Amos Gilad, highlighted this dilemma by stating that,

> 'it is very difficult to solve this contradiction between terror, on one side, and humanitarian assistance on the other…. To ease the daily life of Palestinians we must open the roads between cities, but the moment we do that, we are hit with terrorist attacks'.[25]

However, as Palestinian desperation grew, so did terrorist recruitment and activism.

Operation 'Defensive Shield': From Reactive to Proactive IDF Counter-Insurgency

As a result of the growing lethal nature of Palestinian terrorism – during the first three months of 2002, over 170 Israelis were murdered in terror attacks and following the 27 March 2002 *Seder* (Passover meal) Night Massacre,[26] the Israeli government initiated a third stage to the conflict.

Prior to then, the IDF had adopted – at least officially – a 'low-intensity' and reactive strategy towards Palestinian terror and guerrilla attacks. However, by the end of March 2002, the IDF adopted a much more proactive and aggressive posture. Once the new Israeli government and IDF leadership came to view Israel as being in a state of war, a significant increase in the volume and intensity of the IDF's military operations occurred. Statements by various leading military and political figures reiterated what Prime Minister Sharon had affirmed already in December 2001: 'A war has been forced upon us…. A war of terror [is] being conducted systematically, in an organized fashion and with methodical direction'.[27] Israel was ready to fight Palestinian terror without any half-measures.

This was particularly obvious once Israel decided to unleash the IDF onto the Territories through Operation 'Defensive Shield'. According to Lieutenant General Shaul Mofaz, then Chief of Staff, the principal goals of the operation included: 'neutralizing the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, highlighting the PA's involvement with terrorism, and isolating Arafat'.[28] Israel also decided to

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[25] Major General Amos Gilad, 'Inside the Maelstrom', *The Review*, Vol. 27, No. 12 (December 2002), p. 13.

[26] At the Hotel Park in Netanya a Hamas suicide bomber managed to kill 29 Israelis and injure another 150.

[27] 'Sharon Equates Intifada and Terror', *The Middle East Reporter*, Vol. 101, No. 1171 (15 December 2001), p. 10.

[28] Shaul Mofaz, 'Operation Defensive Shield: Lessons and Aftermath', *Peacewatch No. 387* (18 June 2002), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy,

conduct this major operation in order to restore its deterrent credibility given that it had significantly suffered a major blow in the IDF unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon in May 2000. Mofaz's successor, Lieutenant General Moshe Yaalon justified 'Defensive Shield' as showing the Middle East that

> 'the state of Israel is already no longer considered what [*Hezbollah* leader] Hasan Nasrallah said in his victory speech after we withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000, "a spider web"…. [They believe] Israeli society is not prepared to struggle anymore. Shed its blood and it surrenders. Defensive Shield substantiated that this isn't so'.[29]

In this major operation, roughly 30,000 troops set about to seize weaponry, destroy weapons factories and suicide bomb workshops, arrest terrorists and their support network, eliminate potential suicide bombers, and collect crucial intelligence for the purposes of preventing future attacks. The operation took place in Palestinian West Bank towns, such as Nablus, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Tul Karem and Jenin. 'Operationally, this translated into the encirclement of a city and … the entry of infantry forces [normally a brigade, sometimes two of them], supported by tanks … and by attack helicopters'.[30] The encirclement of these towns was meant to deny terrorists and guerrillas an avenue of escape from IDF search operations.

During Operation 'Defensive Shield', combined IDF infantry, engineer, armor and helicopter assault units were able to maneuver at a relatively high tempo and, rather than adopting traditionally linear attrition tactics, were instead able to 'deploy out of contact with the enemy by selectively seizing small areas … drastically reducing exposure to enemy fire and maintaining momentum by only clearing as necessary'.[31] According to then IDF Head of Doctrine and Training, Brigadier General Gershon HaCohen, 'in urban warfare we [had] to coordinate among many small teams coming from many different directions simultaneously'.[32] This tactical approach was dubbed as 'swarming'.

Such coordination was effectively provided by the newly-formed Field Intelligence Corps, units of which were deployed at the tactical level alongside combat units and which were able, among other things, to pinpoint enemy snipers and other threats in real-time in order for such combat units or for helicopter air cover to neutralize them before making actual contact.[33] With the use of the Field Intelligence Corps, according to its commander, Brigadier General Amnon Sofrin, 'the information now goes faster to the troops and we have closed the gap between intelligence and operations'.[34] By using such rapid 'swarm' tactics, the IDF was able to surprise and confuse Palestinian guerrilla and terrorist fighters, who were deeply embedded within the refugee camps and towns in the Territories and who were expecting to ambush large cumbersome IDF conventional units.

<www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/Peacewatch/peacewatch2002/387.htm>, accessed 6 October 2002.

[29] Major General Moshe Yaalon, 'On the Offensive', *The Review*, Vol. 27, No. 9 (September 2002), p. 11.

[30] Shlomo Brom, 'Operation "Defensive Shield": An Interim Assessment', *Tel Aviv Notes 35* (Tel Aviv: *Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies*, 11 April 2002), p. 1.

[31] Yagil Henkin, 'Urban Warfare and the Lessons of Jenin', *Azure*, Vol. 15 (Summer 2003), <http://www.shalem.org.il/azure/15-henkin.htm>, accessed 23 May 2003.

[32] Barbara Opall-Rome, 'Israel Redefines Tactics', *Defense News*, 16 June 2002.

[33] David Eshel, 'Israel Hones Intelligence Operations to Counter Intifada', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 14, No. 10, (October 2002), p. 24.

[34] Steve Rodan, 'IDF Steps Up Intelligence War against Palestinians', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (January 2001), p. 19.

Palestinian ambushes and sniper fire were mostly circumvented by employing armored D-9 bulldozers. These generated different avenues of approach by powering through buildings, even if at the cost of collateral damage. Both circumvention and 'swarm' tactics were innovations that were adopted as a result of the need to protect forces entering heavily booby-trapped areas.

Moreover, according to the IAF Commander, Major General Dani Halutz, '[the major discovery] we made, during the last operation, was the importance of helicopters for urban fighting'.[35] Up until the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* helicopter units were not trained to fly and operate in urban operations. Out of necessity and through constant tactical learning and innovation, the IAF was able to adapt its helicopter squadrons to conduct urban operations.

Such squadrons were used in various capacities. Helicopter crews were used to coordinate closely with ground commanders who had access to real-time imagery of targets supplied by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) units in order to guarantee that correct targets were attacked. Attack helicopters were also used to provide more accurate fire cover than that provided by tanks, thus, reducing the likelihood of collateral damage and civilian casualties. Attack helicopters gradually became the weapons platform of choice for conducting targeted killings.[36]

Dealing with the Negative Media Fallout

Even though before Operation 'Defensive Shield' senior IDF officers, such as major General Giora Eiland, had warned that 'public opinion, like weather conditions, topography and intelligence information, must be thrown into the mix when evaluating the effectiveness of particularly military organizations',[37] the IDF's decision to ban the free movement of the press in Jenin had obvious negative public opinion repercussions. By not being able to manage the media more effectively in order to encourage it to provide a more realistic account of how the actual IDF operations ensued in the Jenin refugee camp and what were their effect on the local Palestinian population and infrastructure led the press, according to an IDF reservist communications strategist, to fill 'the information gap with imagination, rumor, and disinformation',[38] which the PA was only happy to egg on through its tried and tested propaganda machine.

Despite subsequent IDF and UN reports negating the Palestinians' claims of an IDF massacre the media was able to damage temporarily the IDF's image and legitimacy. Even though the IDF attempted thereafter to prepare its soldiers and commanders to understand the important role of the media in counter-insurgency campaigns and to deal with the media in general, other media setbacks occurred throughout the conflict due to the IDF's overall inability to manage more carefully the media's portrayal of its operations throughout the current *Intifada*.[39] In any case, Operation 'Defensive Shield' ultimately led to the arrest of many terrorist and guerrilla

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[35] Robert Wall and David A. Fulghum, 'IAF to Modify Helos to Fight in Cities', *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, Vol. 156, No. 19 (13 May 2002), p. 27.

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] Barbara Opall-Rome, 'Israeli leaders to move to combat negative perceptions', *Defense News*, 22 July 2001.

[38] Hirsh Goodman and Jonathan Cummings, *The Battle of Jenin: A Case Study in Israel's Communications Strategy, Memorandum No. 63* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, January 2003), p. 22.

[39] See: Baruch Nevo and Yael Shur, *The IDF and the Press During Hostilities* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2003).
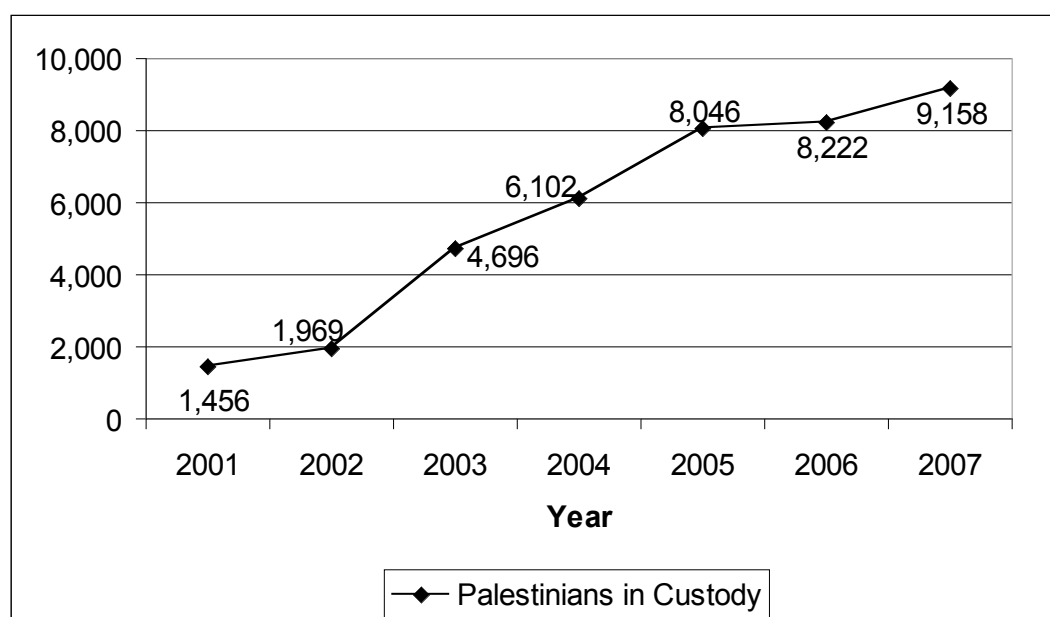
suspects, the partial dismantlement of the terrorist and guerrilla infrastructure within the areas targeted, and definitely confirmed the PA's link with terrorist activity. But this was not enough to stop the Palestinian terror/guerrilla campaign.

Controlling the Ground: Operation 'Determined Path'

Accordingly, following Operation 'Defensive Shield', the IDF entered the fourth stage of it counter-insurgency campaign, dubbed 'Determined Path'. Operation 'Determined Path' was aimed at regaining indefinite control on the ground of all security sensitive areas within the Territories that were known to foster terrorist activities. This would be achieved by reoccupying key Palestinian-controlled urban areas and their adjacent refugee camps. Further restrictive measures on the movement of the population were set up.

The pervasive presence of the IDF and the control of the Territories were meant to facilitate the conduct of sweeping house-to-house searches by *Shin Bet* operatives and IDF task forces. These units were tasked with the mission of eliminating weapons caches, weapons factories and wanted terrorists. By early 2004, the IDF had been able to apprehend and incarcerate on various terror-related charges over 6,000 Palestinians [See Figure 3]. It had also been able to 'decapitate' many of the terrorist group's local spiritual and military leadership, most notably *Hamas'* Sheikh Yassin Mohammed and Abdel Aziz Rantisi.

Figure 3 – Palestinians held in Custody by Israeli Security Services

Source: 'Statistics on Palestinians in the custody of the Israeli security forces', *Bt'Selem*, <http://www.btselem.org/eng/statistics/Detainees_and_Prisoners.asp>, accessed 15 May 2007.

Within the Gaza Strip the IDF was involved in detecting and destroying the wide network of tunnels used to smuggle large quantities of weapons and explosives from Egypt into Gaza. Such underground smuggling efforts increased as the grip of the IDF around and over the land, sea and air access routes into the Territories tightened.

Though the IDF had been effective in reducing the number of successful suicide attacks against Israeli civilian targets by mid-2004, Palestinian violence increased, particularly within the Gaza Strip, where the *Intifada* had become an '"over/under" conflict, with mortar shells and Qassam rockets being increasingly fired against Israeli settlements' and Israeli towns bordering the Gaza Strip and IEDs being targeted against Israeli convoys more frequently than had been the case at the start of the conflict.[40]

So, while the IDF was able to reduce the phenomenon of suicide terrorism by late 2004, Palestinian insurgency had adapted itself by relying more on Gaza-based rocket and IED attacks. Such attacks increased even after the IDF decided to conduct two major operations in the Gaza Strip (i.e., Operations 'Rainbow' in May 2004 and 'Days of Penitence' in October 2004).

Coping with *Al-Aqsa Intifada*

The constant operational use of both IDF regular (conscript and professional) and reservist units during the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* resulted in major cutbacks in training and weapons development programs.[41] While IDF commanders saw operational experience in the Territories as an excellent way for troops to gain 'on-the-job' training and experience, units were often sent into combat missions without the appropriate training and, in some cases, without the fitting equipment (due to the IDF's budgetary constraints). This led to various operational blunders, which occasionally cost the lives of IDF soldiers.

In addition to a lack of preparation and experience in urban warfare within many regular IDF units (some units, however, had begun training for such a contingency following the 1996 Hasmonean Tunnel riots), the IDF in general was also unprepared to conduct the regular constabulary duties it had struggled with already during the first *Intifada*. Not much effort was put into learning and implementing the lessons from the IDF's experiences in the Territories during that period and it, consequently, had to re-learn them as it tried to conduct patrols, house searches, set up checkpoints and operate within a largely hostile civilian population.

Nonetheless, given the IDF's need to train and adapt its forces to urban warfare and routine constabulary missions, new training schemes were adopted progressively during the conflict. They allowed forces to operate more effectively and with a greater reference to ethical and human rights issues. For example, the IDF School of Military Law produced an ethical code of conduct, which specified 11 key rules of ethical behavior. This code has been taught to both regular and reservist units through courses that offer wide-ranging role-playing exercises that address the characteristic predicaments that soldiers face while serving in the Territories, particularly at checkpoints.[42] The IDF School of Leadership has also held residential workshops where combat units can discuss their moral misgivings in a protected environment between

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[40] See: Arieh O'Sullivan, 'IDF: 44% Fall in Terror Victims', *Jerusalem Post*, 30 December 2004.

[41] See: Sergio Catignani, 'Israel Defence Forces Organizational Changes in an Era of Budgetary Cutbacks', *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 149, No. 5 (October 2004), pp. 72-6.

[42] See: Amos Guiora, 'Balancing IDF Checkpoints and International Law: Teaching the IDF Code of Conduct', *Jerusalem Issue Brief No. 3*, 19 November 2003, Institute of Contemporary Affairs, <http://www.jcpa.org/brief/brief3-8.htm>, accessed on 11 November 2004.

deployments. Such discussions have been effective in decreasing the pressures and stress that have accumulated during their operations in the Territories.[43]

Furthermore, the IDF initiated a multi-million dollar program in June 2002 to upgrade the IDF's Tze'elim National Training Center in the Negev desert. These upgraded training grounds were set up to give Israeli soldiers superior urban warfare training facilities. These reproduce Palestinian cities and, thus, prepare the IDF soldier for all kinds of contingencies within the Territories. As stated above, however, not all units were able to undergo decent levels of training until 2005 due to the operational tempo that the IDF was under in order to fight ongoing Palestinian violence and terrorism.

Frustration, inexperience, operational stress and in some cases malice nonetheless played a major part in influencing negatively the behavior and conduct of some IDF units, particularly conscript units, which were unable to understand the importance of avoiding unprofessional and/or abusive methods and actions that would alienate the Palestinian civilian population and incite it into adopting further violent means.[44] Pressed with the need to provide security by eliminating terrorists, collecting as much intelligence as possible, arresting individuals affiliated to terrorist groups, and pre-empting any major security threat against Israel, the IDF adopted mostly a 'kinetic' approach with not much regard for a 'hearts and minds' strategy. Thus, quite often continuous IDF operations, rather than lowering the level of Palestinian violence, actually raised it, at least until mid-2004. Mindful, furthermore, of the belief that Israel was fighting a war and that it was facing an existential threat in the guise of terrorism, the achievement at all costs of immediate military tactical objectives very often took precedence over the need to determine whether or not the realization of such objectives actually achieved Israel's ultimate strategic goal of obtaining 'victory'.[45]

The IDF by 2004 at last began to grasp that continued counter-insurgency operations, which may have yielded significant tactical achievements, did not amount to a strategic resolution to the conflict. Indeed, in February 2004 an IDF committee, chaired by Major General Amos Yadlin, found that despite great tactical innovation and initiative, Israel did not really follow a clear strategy, this was partly because coordination between the political and military echelons was lacking. It also concluded that despite the considerable latitude for maneuver given to the IDF, it was not able to stop the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* altogether.[46]

Unilateral Disengagement and the Security Fence
In any case by late 2002 even Ariel Sharon, had come to the realization that the IDF could not sit in the Territories and conduct counter-insurgency operations indefinitely without jeopardizing Israel's economy, the IDF's operational preparedness and the IDF soldier's moral fiber. Sharon, in fact, stated in an interview that, 'I do not

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[43] Lieutenant Colonel Timna Shmueli, Head of IDF School of Leadership Development. Interview with author, 19 August 2004, Netanya, Israel.

[44] For soldiers' personal accounts of abusive and unprofessional actions carried out by IDF units in the Territories see: *Testimonial Booklet No. 2*, Breaking the Silence,
 <http://www.shovrimshtika.org/public/ptihabeesh-englishforweb.pdf>, accessed 3 April 2007.

[45] See: Sergio Catignani, 'The Strategic Impasse in Low-Intensity Conflicts: The Gap between Israeli Counter-Insurgency Strategy and Tactics during the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (February 2005), pp. 57-75.

[46] See: Amos Harel and Avi Yissacharoff, *The Seventh War: How We Won and Why We Lost the War with the Palestinians* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing, 2004), p. 328 [In Hebrew].

want to have our country mobilized forever to sit in Nablus'.[47] The decision to create a security barrier, which would separate Israelis from Palestinians and protect Israel from further terrorist infiltration, had already been taken in late 2001. The partial construction and operation of this security fence by 2003 was very effective in reducing the number of successful suicide attacks in Israel and, according to some analysts, proved to be a much more effective method than Israel's targeted killing policy.[48]

Sharon's belief that there was no serious Palestinian peace partner, furthermore, led him to adopt in late 2003 a unilateral disengagement plan, which would lead to the total dismantlement of Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip and limited parts of the West Bank as well as the redeployment of IDF forces from such areas. Unilateral disengagement was perceived as a bold and incredible move given that it was conceived and executed by Sharon, a historical champion of the Israeli settler movement. Yet, amid considerable domestic controversy, due to opposition from right-wing parties and the settlement movement, and international condemnation, due to Israel's unilateralist approach to 'solving' the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the disengagement plan was carried out in August 2005.

Sharon regarded such a unilateral approach necessary. Despite the fact that US President George Bush's Road Map peace plan, which was first proposed in April 2002, called for internal democratic reforms within the PA and for the PA to clamp down on terrorism, no progress had occurred on either fronts. By unilaterally disengaging Sharon hoped that Israel would reduce the source of friction and tension between Israeli settlers and local Palestinians, reduce the burden of the IDF that was tasked with protecting such settlers and, hopefully, kick-start the Road Map peace plan, but by August 2005 such moves proved too little, too late.

Conclusion

By ultimately adopting a military-oriented strategy vis-à-vis Palestinian terrorist groups and activities, the IDF was able by late 2004 to wear down terrorists' capabilities. Israel's strategy, though, was not able to reduce terrorist motivation and influence within the Territories. Nonetheless, Israel's choice of strategy was only natural given that its perception of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* as a war and the, somewhat justified, perception of the PA as not really wanting peace encouraged the IDF to adopt quite an aggressive military campaign. Without a peace to be won, according to the Israeli military and civilian leadership, winning the hearts and minds of the local Palestinian population became an almost irrelevant goal. Hence, Israel's preference for an overall kinetic strategy during the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*.

In a certain sense, 'the terrorists attacks affected the mode and intensity of Israeli security activity, but that same activity influenced Palestinian violence'.[49] Having, thus, emasculated the PA's security and governmental capabilities between 2000 and 2004, and prevented a significant number of Palestinian terrorist attacks at the cost though of alienating and, thus, galvanizing the local Palestinian population, it was only a matter of time before *Hamas* would gain ascendancy in the Territories and it officially did when it won the Palestinian legislative council elections in January 2006. By seriously eroding

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[47] Caroline B. Glick, 'Sharon: No Military Solution to the War with the Palestinians', *Jerusalem Post*, 26 September 2002.
[48] See: Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, 'Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada', *Social Forces*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (June 2006), pp. 1969-86.
[49] Yaacov Bar-Siman Tov, *op.cit.*, p. 52.

the PA's security and administrative infrastructure as well as alienating significant portions of the Palestinian population given its heavy-handed tactics, the IDF ultimately paved the way for *Hamas* to gain political ground in the Territories.[50]

Even though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, through the IDF's counter-insurgency operations, has somewhat become routine and normalized in terms of its intensity, it has by no means led to a more malleable political end state. On the contrary, with *Hamas* unfortunately in power in the Gaza Strip, it is only a matter of time before the next round of hostilities breaks out. As such, the IDF's counter-insurgency campaign over the last six years has only provided a short-term tactical interval to the underlying antagonism that has defined for the most part Israeli-Palestinian political relations over the past century. Without a clear, or realistic, political end state in mind and the management of a counter-insurgency campaign that does not involve and integrate a parallel political and diplomatic process it is quite difficult to achieve anything from a strategic point of view, let alone 'unequivocal victory'.

In sum, the Israeli case study can teach us two important lessons that should be applied to future counter-insurgency scenarios. Firstly, a kinetic, even if tactically successful, counter-insurgency campaign cannot achieve any major strategic or political dividends without carefully balancing such a campaign with clear political objectives/direction and ongoing diplomatic activity. Secondly, if insurgencies are viewed as 'wars' by the counter-insurgent, the proclivity for employing a kinetic approach to address insurgent threats becomes stronger, given that the military aspects of such conflicts are over-emphasized to the detriment of the important underlying political realities that brought about the eruption of such conflicts in the first place. By failing to address such political realities and by relying too heavily on the military to 'stamp out' an insurgency, a counter-insurgency at best will be able to reduce the level of violence for a limited period until a new round of hostilities erupts or, at worst, merely feed into the tit-for-tat escalatory process of violence that so often plagues 'long wars'.

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[50] While the IDF's activities encouraged Palestinian radicalization, one cannot discount in any case the fact that the PLO's rampant corruption played an important part in encouraging support for *Hamas* to its detriment.

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