



Interview

MAJ. GEN. GUY ZUR

Commander, Israel Ground Forces Command

Next month, the Israel Defense Forces General Staff will hold a series of closed-door deliberations to finalize its proposed Plan Gideon, an estimated 82 billion shekel (US \$21 billion) modernization plan through 2020. Compared to previous plans, a larger share of funding — nearly 40 percent — is slated for upgrading combined arms maneuvering capabilities and combat readiness of ground forces.

As the man responsible for organizing, training and equipping the Israeli Army, Zur is designing the future force for at least a decade to come. He shared highlights from his strategic blueprint, dubbed Ground Horizon, which aims to render ground forces much more decisive than they were in the 2006 Lebanon war or in the most recent Protective Edge campaign in Gaza.

Q. What major factors have you taken into account in your proposed blueprint for the IDF's future ground force?

A. We needed to look at the enemy and the changes he's undergone, anticipate changes we're likely to face in the future and determine the best way to apply all the lessons we're learning. Based on all this, we have an understanding of what materiel, technologies and operational concepts are needed for a very strong and effective maneuvering force across a spectrum of scenarios.

Q. Plan Gideon is for five years, but your blueprint, what you call Ground Horizon, extends further into the future, correct?

A. Gideon will start from 2016 and run through 2020, but we're all looking at least 10 years, sometimes 20 years ahead. My portion, which we call Ground Horizon, is a process that took about a year. With major modernization plans, like tanks, big guns and troop carriers, we need to think how they'll develop over 20 years since such a huge investment is required.

Q. Considering all the above, what is the goal for fortifying and crafting the future ground force?

A. To be decisive over what we call disappearing enemies; forces that are often invisible and have largely learned to counter our methods of operations.

The fact is that today, there is no enemy around us that can achieve his objectives against us. At the end of the day, when the IDF is required to achieve victory over the enemy, we will know how to do it through maneuvers

and every situation.

Q. Critics would say 75 Israelis killed in 50 days of fighting in the summer 2014 Gaza war was unreasonable. What's your view?

A. You always need to ask what you want to achieve and how. In Protective Edge, we wanted to achieve a certain end-state without vanquishing Hamas. ... Everyone knew the game plan, and it required us to achieve this in a different way (by directly confronting the tunnels). In the end, Hamas is extremely weakened and won't be ready for another round for a long time, and that was the objective we set for ourselves. But this question is a major lesson of Protective Edge, and a major driver of our Ground Horizon plan.

Q. Would 50 days be considered reasonable for the next ground war in Lebanon?

A. That's too open a question. It must be considered in political, diplomatic and international context. It depends on what would motivate our government to go for this action in the first place. Imagine if the alternative was huge sustained casualties to the homefront. Under those circumstances, our government may be willing to pay costs associated with fully maximized, high-intensity ground maneuvering, and not just pinpoint, tactical objectives.

Q. So what have you learned?

A. We have to develop proper commanders at all echelons, from the smallest squad to corps commanders, and we cannot compromise on our training regime. It

must be consistent and not be subjected to budgetary-driven halts and restarts as we've done in the past. And we must tailor force training to specific challenges.

Q. Are you referring to the tunnel threat, which I assume was a major lesson of the last Gaza campaign?

A. The gaps we discovered with regard to the subterranean threat were pretty much across the board in terms of technology, operational concept and training. We underestimated the magnitude of the threat. Our training was a matter of too little, too late. When we asked ourselves what was our certified capability for this mission, we realized we were deficient, but we didn't realize to what extent. We didn't see that it was at the heart of the enemy's CONOP. Gaza is an entire city on top of a city.

Q. But capabilities exist in other industries, for example, the energy exploration industry, no? Couldn't they be adapted for the sands of Gaza, or the mountains along the Lebanese and Syrian borders?

A. In the Gaza context, we suffered from the fact that the technology is not yet developed for threats 20-30 meters deep. It doesn't really interest the industry. We looked at what we could take from other industrial sectors, but the truth is, they are not readily adaptable for our particular threat. And anyone who claims otherwise is being misleading.

During Protective Edge, we were able to improvise; to take things that weren't developed for this purpose and adapt them for the mission.

Q. So where are you today? We've seen an MoD program called Snake Pit, growing proficiency of your Combat Engineering Corps, use of robotics, canines, etc.

A. We've advanced a lot, but still, the subterranean threat demands solutions. We have answers for part of the problems, but I can't elaborate. Suffice it to say there is no magic solution. But the most important progress is that we've adopted a certain technique that we can use to fight this threat. We now have a validated, formal CONOP that was codified into manuals immediately after Protective Edge.

Q. What's next with regard to the tunnel threat?



ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES



SERVICE PROFILE

End strength (including reserves):
513,000

Formations (including reserves)

- Three territorial commands
- 16 divisions
- 21 independent brigades/groups

2014 data from Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies

A. We understand that it's not enough to have a unique capability entrusted with a small number of forces. We need to give these means and methods to all of our forces, and to train accordingly. Now we're building the infrastructure to train in, and as we train, we're discovering we have very creative and resourceful commanders who have been able to improve on operational methods. The best thing to happen to us will be to turn these tunnels into death traps. Once we know how to do this, we'll be in a very different place.

Q. What other lessons inspired your future force blueprint?

A. With regard to combined arms battle, we are emphasizing the need for every battalion to transform itself into a hybrid unit when necessary. We decided not to do this organically, since our forces are busy with routine operations and we need to preserve the traditional, professional chain of command. But our training is such that our combat missions are no longer single service. There's no longer armor without infantry, combat engineering, intel and artillery capabilities, which is something we couldn't say about the second Lebanon war or even Cast Lead [the December 2008-January 2009 operation in Gaza]. And it's all connected through the net.

Q. Your people often speak of cross-service interoperability and joint force combat. This has been a priority for several years now, no?

A. Absolutely. When I look a decade or two ahead, I don't know if the term interoperability with air and sea forces will still be relevant. That's because it's clear there needs to be a single force fighting in the same domain, all of which must be supported by a robust integrated C4I network.

We understand that even if we're not organized like this in routine operations, the need to

operate in wartime against disappearing enemies is a basic need.

Q. Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, IDF chief of staff, recently announced his decision to stand up a commando brigade. What was the rationale?

A. Because we're not a rich Army, we needed to prioritize in a way that the improved capabilities, and lethality of a few can influence larger combat goals. We need to entrust a good part of our qualitative edge to those units that can rapidly deliver added value in complex operations, whether they are in the urban theater, against subterranean threats or in other conditions. We understood that once we optimize special forces for these missions and give them everything they need in terms of weaponry, resources and training, we can strengthen ourselves with a certain center of gravity that was previously diffused.

So we're merging elite units from infantry, combat engineering, artillery and technological specialists and grooming them for high-end, elite missions.

Q. What about active protection systems (APS)? Are these prerequisites not only for tanks, but for troop carriers and other ground vehicles as well?

A. Even before Protective Edge, the [Rafael-developed Trophy] APS deployed on Merkava Mk4s has proven to be an enormous success. Now we're equipping Namer heavy APCs with this capability, the first of which will probably go to our Golani infantry brigade. Our APS is performing beyond expectations. It will be the Iron Dome for our infantry.

But it's expensive. Every platform must be equipped. So we'll have to prioritize and outfit only those units facing more complex threats such as the disappearing enemy I've spoken about. □

By **Barbara Opall-Rome** in Tel Aviv.

