

The Death of a Legend?

The “legend” of the Israel Defense Force (IDF) ground army nearly died in the last couple of weeks.

In the Middle East, perception is often as important as reality, and the perception of the IDF as a nearly invincible force has been a dominant factor of political life in that region for many decades.

The military value of armies to the states which maintain them is often a matter of a belief lodged in the hearts of enemies that an army can not be beaten. The Muslim belief in the invincibility of the IDF has been absolute and that belief suffered massive damage in the last days.

The IDF has always had a great reputation, a reputation grounded in wars against Arab armies, Hollywood productions, popular novels by “Book of the Month Club” authors, and a lot of “chutzpah.” If you are old enough to remember, recall the statements made during the Vietnam War that slyly suggested that if the war had been sub-contracted to the IDF, then all would have been well. Moshe Dayan went to visit the war and said forthrightly that Israel had never seen an enemy like the North Vietnamese Army, but who listened?

The IDF was born of the “marriage” of the Hagana, the Palmach, and the British Jewish Brigade in the Israeli War of Independence. In that war, these three forces fought well but, not as well as legend indicates. Most of the Arab national armies simply fought worse and made more mistakes. The combat actions of the Lebanese, Syrians and Egyptians were a joke. The Iraqis could not seem to make up their minds about anything. Only Jordan with its tiny Bedouin Arab Legion commanded by British WW2 veterans

gave the new state a “run for its money.” At Jerusalem and most particularly at the Latrun Police fort on the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, small Arab Legion forces fought well and held their ground. At Latrun, the Israeli forces lost more than a thousand men in attacks that lasted for months and never captured the fort. In that fight the odds were heavily in favor of the Israelis in both numbers of men and equipment.

The 1956 War was a real turning point in the generation of the IDF’s image as a world class fighting force. S.L.A. Marshall wrote a splendid book about the fighting in Sinai, but in fact it was Anglo-French intervention in the Canal Zone that decided the issue against Egypt. In particular, the private declaration by the Soviet Union to Nasser that the Soviets would not “back” Egypt in defiance of President Eisenhower’s insistence on a cease-fire ended all discussion of further hostilities. S.L.A Marshall wrote another splendid and popular book about the short 1967 campaign. It was even more complimentary than the first had been. In that war there was no denying the fact that the IDF’s jet air force was simply more than the Arabs could handle. There followed the 1973 Canal crossing operation by the Egyptians in which Israel’s intelligence estimative process failed to predict the operation and in which Ariel Sharon demonstrated his flair for “out of the box” thinking by decisively defeating the Egyptian forces through the ingenious device of attacking under cover of a UN Cease-fire which Israel had already accepted. Triumph followed triumph. In all those wars (except the War of Independence), the periods of actual fighting were quite short, usually a couple of weeks.

What sort of army is the IDF? Most Americans will be surprised to learn that it is an army completely unlike their own. The IDF is built on a model of military organization derived from the experience of the Russian Tsar’s

army that early Zionist settlers brought to Palestine. Like the Imperial Russian Army, the IDF ground army is recruited by conscription. It has no career sergeants in the ground combat forces except for technicians. Think about that. There are no tough, experienced old first sergeants in the IDF. Instead, the draftee stream is screened for talent and some are picked to become sergeants-major, corporals, etc. This pool of new sergeants is further screened and a few are sent to officer training schools for a few months. The net result of this process is that the conscript “class” for one year provides the leadership for the following year’s conscript class, and all of these draftees are led by lieutenants who are only a year or so older than they. With the exception of a small number of specialists, none of the junior officers have any education beyond the Israeli version of high school. Some of the more promising lieutenants and captains are invited to stay in the army and are eventually sent to university by the IDF. Officers do not normally serve past age 50. After conscripted service soldiers go into the reserves where they receive periodic training. Most (70%) of the IDF ground force is made up of older men in reserve units who once did a couple of years service.

What this means is that the level of experience and training in this force is questionable. One must ask just how good their proficiency in difficult skills like artillery and tank gunnery really is. Years of employment in occupation duty in the two intifadas can not have made a great contribution to unit combat skills.

An objective view of IDF ground force operations in the Lebanon border over the last two weeks would be that it has not been impressive. The IDF has done its best to cover that up with statements that amount to “we never wanted to hold the ground,” but the signs of failure are unmistakable.

Hizbullah still holds the ground that the IDF withdrew from after fighting the guerillas. The guerrillas are still firing rockets into Israel out of that ground.

This lesson will be absorbed in the Islamic World and then a price will be paid for poor performance.