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The Israel Defense Forces

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# **The Operational Routine in Border Protection Within the Northern Command – Flash Audit**





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## Background

Defending Israel's borders constitutes a primary mission of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Border defense relies on several main operational elements: the establishment of a current intelligence picture; timely early warning systems; the ability to detain and contain and neutralize threats within enemy territory; ensuring the mobility and lethality of ground interception forces; and a robust information and fire support framework.

The Northern Command (NC) is responsible for the defense of Israel's northern ground border, which stretches from Rosh HaNikra in the west to the southern Golan Heights where the borders with Jordan and Syria converge. One of the crucial components of border defense is the routine security activities conducted by maneuvering forces (infantry, armor, artillery, engineering, and combat reconnaissance) who are assigned to the Northern Command for operational engagement periods typically lasting several weeks. Operations are carried out by forces at various posts, alongside units engaged in mounted patrols and ambushes together with physical obstacles and intelligence sources responsible for providing warning about enemy intentions and preparations. All designed to inhibit the infiltration of terrorists.

In 2023, Hezbollah significantly escalated its activities near the border, conducting both overt and covert operations on a daily basis. These actions including attacks and the establishment of a network of outposts adjacent to the border fence, which challenged the Northern Command. Notable incidents include a terrorist infiltration on March 13, 2023, when Hezbollah operatives planted an explosive device at the Megiddo junction, injuring an Israeli citizen. Additionally, on April 6, 2023, rockets were launched from southern Lebanon into Israeli territory, and on July 6, 2023, Hezbollah militants fired an anti-tank missile (ATM) from the Mount Dov area at an IDF patrol vehicle near the Rager Village. These activities violate UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted on August 11, 2006, which followed the conclusion of the Second Lebanon War.

In response to mounting threat along the Blue Line<sup>1</sup>, the IDF launched the "Northern Shield" project. This project aimed to enhance operational infrastructure by replacing the outdated

<sup>1</sup> The Lebanese border, known within the IDF as the "Blue Line", is the IDF withdrawal line from Lebanon in 2000, as determined by the UN.



metal and wire indicative border fence with a state-of-the-art barrier, featuring a high concrete wall integrated with advanced technological systems.

The flash audit was conducted on July 10, 2023, and the draft report was subsequently disseminated to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, and the Israel Defense Forces for their feedback. The IDF's response was received on September 27, 2023, just a week and a half before the commencement of the "Iron Swords" war.

The "Iron Swords" war began on October 7, 2023, with extensive rocket fire originating from the Gaza Strip directed towards Israel. Simultaneously, thousands of terrorists, mainly from Hama, infiltrated Israeli territory from Gaza, including the settlements near the border. This resulted in the murder of approximately 1,400 individuals – civilians, soldiers, and members of security and rescue services and the abduction of over 200 individuals, which included soldiers, Israeli civilians, and foreign nationals. As the war continues definitive figures for casualties and abductions are still pending.

The significant deficiencies and gaps outlined in this report, indicative of the pre – "Iron Swords" war environment, emphasize the audit's critical importance and risks involved.

These shortcomings are a clear warning regarding the security of Israel's borders, particularly the northern border where this flash audit occurred.

It should be noted that this audit is not a substitute a comprehensive investigation into the events leading up to the "Iron Swords" war, which will thoroughly review the actions of all governmental and security levels before, during, and after the conflict.



Key Figures

Several divisions

Were routinely stationed to protect the northern border at the time of the audit

Several battalions

Infantry, armor, and artillery (regular and reserve troops) were routinely deployed to defend the northern border at the time of the audit

Numerous operatives

From the Radwan unit was routinely deployed in southern Lebanon, across the border from Israel

Only about 30 meters

Separate a certain post on the Ramim Ridge from a Hezbollah outpost established across from the post, at the time of the audit

Only parts

From the "Northern Shield" wall were completed by June 2023

In some of the posts

That were examined, some of the mounted patrols were performed by soldiers in unarmored vehicles

Departmental weapons

There is a disparity between the weapons provided to regular battalions in comparison with those of the reserve battalions

Audit Actions

The Office of the State Comptroller, headed by the State Comptroller, conducted a flash audit on July 10, 2023 to assess the competence and operational readiness of the Northern Command posts and forces for routine security activities. At the tactical level, the audit specifically assessed training and preparation for operational engagement, the readiness and combat preparedness of stations within the posts and mounted patrols, and adherence to established instructions and routine operational procedures. Furthermore, the audit included an examination of several secondary safety and infrastructure concerns at the posts. This process involved discussions with commanders and feedback sessions with soldiers at the posts.

The audit was executed as a one-day surprise inspection, conducted by four audit teams that simultaneously visited eight routinely manned posts. These posts included a mix of infantry and armor forces, comprising both active duty and reserve units. At the time of the audit, some units had just begun their operational engagement period, while others had been active for several weeks.

The sub-committee of the Knesset State Audit Committee decided not to bring this report in its entirety before the Knesset, but to publish only parts thereof, to protect the state's



security, in accordance with Section 17 of the State Comptroller's Law, 1958 [Consolidated Version].

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## Key Findings



### The Operational Reality in the Blue Line Area, on the audit Date



**Blue Line Operational Reality** – Hezbollah's intensified provocative actions erode the impact of Resolution 1701 and escalate tensions with our forces, posing a significant risk of conflict in the region. Moreover, the operational necessity for forces to rapidly respond to fence alerts increases their exposure to danger and could impair their operational readiness.



**Intelligence Gathering** – Deficiencies have been identified in this domain.



**The "Northern Shield" Wall** – Only segments of the "Northern Shield" structure had been constructed as of June 2023.



**Alerts Along the Fence** – Indicative fence alerts consistently occur at one post and another throughout the day, sometimes reaching ten during nighttime hours. Every alert demands a force deployment to investigate potential enemy infiltration. This high frequency of alerts, when not triggered by actual enemy activity, could erode the operational readiness and vigilance of the forces assigned to respond.




**Demarcation of the Border Line (the Blue Line)** – Numerous locations along the Lebanon border have inadequately spaced marker barrels. This poor spacing complicates precise border identification, leading to encounters with approaching Hezbollah operatives and civilians. These encounters create friction with IDF forces, who must intervene to distance them.





**Rules of Engagement in the Northern Border** – Discussions with personnel stationed along the northern border revealed that soldiers are familiar with the sector's rules of engagement. However, these fighters expressed their belief that the required operational measures, leading up to actual firing, are disproportionate to the perceived threats. The "Hiram" Territorial Brigade Commander noted that a recent review (June–July 2023) of the sector's rules of engagement resulted in a decision to maintain the existing directives.



## Live Fire Training




-  **Training with a Specific Weapon** – Fighters from the "Kfir" Brigade have not undergone training with a specific weapon since their basic training. One soldier at a certain post had not received shooting training with a specific weapon prior to the engagement period.

## Training and Certification for Reserve Personnel

-  **Authorization to Fire a Specific Weapon** – Reserve soldiers serving at a specific post have not been authorized to fire a specific weapon. As a result, the soldiers are not equipped with these weapons during their engagement periods, unlike the active duty battalions at adjacent post, despite that these are basic weapons for IDF infantry units.
-  **Certification in a Specific Weapon** – Despite the operational need and the Galilee Division Commander's emphasis to the audit on force lethality, a specific weapon used during engagements on the Blue Line is neither stationed at a particular reserve post nor are the reserve soldiers there certified to operate it. This absence represents an operational gap, impacting the forces' lethality and increasing the risk to the reserve soldiers. This lack of weapon certification and consequent non-use in combat operations undermines the basic operational capabilities and lethality of infantry forces, a point underscored by the Galilee Division Commander.

The lack of certification necessary for operating certain weapons and as a result not using them in operational engagements impairs the fundamental operational capability and lethality of the infantry forces. The Galilee Division commander has stressed the importance of these weapons.

## Supply of Certain Weapons and the Operational Worthiness of Equipment


-  **Certain Weapons** – At a certain post, manned by reserve forces, certain weapons were not present, although they are part of the fighters' basic weapons, and they are present at the other posts inspected.
-  **The Condition of Patrol Vehicles** – Vehicles of a certain type located at a certain post are outdated and have many malfunctions. Consequently, commanders are forced to cancel operational patrols, as happened at the time of the audit.
-  **Armored Vehicles** – At some of the posts inspected, some of the mounted patrols are performed in unarmored vehicles.



-  **The Condition of Patrol Vehicles and Their Availability** – At a certain post, there is a deficiency.

## The Post: Defense and Infrastructure

-  **Certain deficiencies emerged on these issues.**

-  **Security Measures at the Posts** – The audit revealed that the posts on the Blue Line in the Hiram Territorial Brigade are not equipped with certain measures, even though these may improve the security of the post against attack. The Hiram Territorial Brigade Commander informed the audit team on August 7, 2023, that according to the Territorial Brigade Defense Order, the security of the post relies on the soldiers guarding it and there is no directive requiring the installation of these measures. However, with the understanding that such measures can streamline the security of the post, the Territorial Brigade is examining the placement of the measures at a particular post.

There are deficiencies in defense and infrastructure at the outposts' especially defense, coping with a specific threat, and the operational conduct of the outpost forces and the surrounding area.





**Preparing the Forces for Operational Engagement Periods** – The post commanders positively noted the training they received from the commanders of the Territorial Brigades and their staff officers during the entry stage into operational engagement periods.

**Briefing Before a Mounted Patrol** – In the posts where the audit was conducted, briefings are conducted before mounted patrols and to approve plans for the patrol commander's tasks, the patrol schedule, the threat analysis and the required operational response.






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## Key Recommendations

-  The Prime Minister and the State Security Cabinet should examine the implications of Lebanon's non-compliance with Resolution 1701, given the current security situation in southern Lebanon, and develop a policy response to address the resulting operational challenges.
-  The Chief of Staff is urged to assess the necessary operational response along the Blue Line, considering border threats, security dynamics, force disposition, and northern border



resources. This assessment should inform instructions on preparatory measures to counter the escalating threats and risks since early 2023. Additionally, the Chief of Staff should analyze the Blue Line situation, including Hezbollah's proximity, daily friction, and obstacle deficiencies, to improve force mission effectiveness.

-  The Operations Directorate and the Northern Command should conduct a comprehensive review of the rules of engagement regarding the use of force by IDF personnel in the northern border sector. This review should assess the implementation of these rules based on individual circumstances and responses, leading to refined instructions for the forces to enhance deterrence and protect soldiers' lives. Additionally, the Northern Command should continue to explore solutions to reduce false alarms that unnecessarily burden the forces.
-  The Ground Forces should address shortages in training ammunition and ensure that personnel engage in shooting practice to adequately prepare and train for the operational use of their assigned and specific weapons.
-  The Ground Forces and the Northern Command should ensure that reserve personnel receive training on specific and all other necessary weapons, with appropriate resource allocation. The Northern Command should evaluate the necessity of assigning specific weapons across all sectors and work with the Ground Forces to complete certification for reserve forces or develop alternative solutions to address this gap. This aims to enhance the lethality and operational effectiveness of the IDF's reserve forces in operational engagement, enabling them to effectively confront the enemy while minimizing risks to their personnel.
-  The Northern Command must ensure that all posts, including those involving reserve forces, are equipped with the necessary weapons, thereby providing a lethality advantage during security incidents. Furthermore, the Northern Command must, in conjunction with relevant authorities, ensure the allocation and enhancement of resources to improve the protective capabilities of the forces.
-  The Northern Command is obligated to rectify deficiencies that have arisen in the domain of defense and infrastructure at the posts, with a particular emphasis on defense issues, and to ensure adherence to the guidelines outlined in the post defense and base defense documents.



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## Summary

Israel's northern border is threatened by hostile entities, posing a significant operational challenge for the IDF, especially along the Lebanon frontier. Hezbollah's open and daily activities in this area, with the intent to carry out terrorist operations, exacerbate this situation. The ongoing "Iron Swords" war, which started on October 7, 2023, and remains unresolved at the time of this report (end of October 2023), increases the potential threat from Lebanon to military outposts. This requires immediate analysis and the development of lessons learned at these outposts and within routine security operations.

The flash audit was conducted on July 10, 2023, and the draft report was subsequently distributed to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, and the Israel Defense Forces for their feedback. The IDF's response to the draft report was received on September 27, 2023, just a week and a half prior to the terrorist events in the southern region and rocket fire into Israel, on October 7, 2023, which initiated the "Iron Swords" war.

The significant deficiencies and gaps outlined in this report, indicative of the pre-"Iron Swords" war environment, emphasize the audit's crucial importance and the risks involved. These deficiencies are a clear warning regarding the security of Israel's borders, especially the northern border where this flash audit occurred.

It should be noted that this audit does not substitute for a comprehensive investigation into the events leading up to the "Iron Swords" war, which will thoroughly review the actions of all governmental and security levels before, during, and after the conflict.

The audit indicated positive aspects: forces stationed along the northern border systematically prepare for operational engagement through combat and pre-employment training (PET), demonstrate familiarity with the sector's characteristics, threats, and required exercises, and diligently adhere to established operational guidelines. Furthermore, they are generally equipped with the necessary weapons and equipment. However, the audit also revealed several deficiencies: inadequate training and qualification of personnel on various weapon types, shortcomings in weaponry qualification and infrastructure at operational posts, and the insufficient preparation and integration of the reserve battalion into operational engagement compared to regular battalions, particularly in equipment and basic weapon utilization training.

It is noteworthy that the obstacle along the Blue Line is obsolete, and the "Northern Shield" initiative, aimed at creating an advanced barrier, remains in its initial stages.

In light of this security context and the identified deficiencies, it is recommended that the Prime Minister and the State Security Cabinet assess the ramifications of Lebanon's non-compliance with Resolution 1701. This audit, which as stated was concluded prior to the resolution of the "Iron Swords" war, also proposes that the Chief of Staff evaluate the



alignment between the order of forces and the operational measures found at the northern border, considering the security dynamics, and instruct the execution of the preparatory measures required in response to the trend of escalating threats and risks observed since early 2023. Furthermore, it is advised that the Northern Command implement measures to enhance the tactical readiness and capability of the ongoing routine security forces for their missions. Collaboration with the Ground Forces is recommended to improve the suitability of operational posts and equipment, including addressing weapon shortages, repairing patrol vehicles, and upgrading infrastructure at military posts. These actions aim to ensure effective missions execution and enhance personnel living conditions.

Although developed before the "Iron Swords" war, the audit recommendations have gained renewed significance due to the developments observed since the conflict began. These developments further highlight the critical need for the Northern Command to urgently address the identified deficiencies, informed by ongoing learning and the immediate lessons of the "Iron Swords" war.

