



War Without End

The global war against terror from a British perspective

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America's S.O.S to the IDF



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America's S.O.S to the IDF

By Amir Oren

At the end of last month, Brigadier General Joseph Votel, a boyish-looking, tall and smiling American, made an urgent request to an old friend of his from Washington – also a brigadier general, but in the Golani Brigade rather than the Rangers – Nitzan Nuriel, the chief of the foreign liaison department of the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces. So urgent was the message that the Pentagon didn't even update their military attache in Tel Aviv. Votel implored Nuriel to send him a top-secret item the IDF has developed that could be useful in combating the improvised explosive devices (IED) used against U.S. forces in Iraq.

Nuriel called the chief of the Engineering Corps, Brigadier General Shimon Daniel, who was the Northern Command chief engineering officer during the war against Hezbollah IEDs before the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon and who has been holding professional contacts with Votel and his aides for the past year and a half. Daniel convened the Israeli experts, Nuriel set off on the obstacle course of coordination and authorization - and within a record time of five days, the items in question and their manuals were on a plane headed overseas.

It may sound exaggerated, unfounded, or at least pretentious, but at the end of 2005, the salvation of U.S. President George W. Bush is in large measure dependent on the military intelligence of Israel: the ability of the IDF, the Defense Ministry and the defense industries to help the Americans thwart the IED attacks in Iraq is becoming the tipping point on which the Bush administration is tottering. This conclusion is the final link in a logical chain, which is known to the decision-makers and those in uniform but has been hidden from others.

Bush's most severe entanglement is in Iraq; the quagmire has resulted in the deaths of more than 2,000 U.S. troops since the start of the war, though a quarter of them died in accidents, from sickness or suicides. The most lethal factor are the IEDs planted along roadways or in booby-trapped vehicles. By the Americans' admission, the most effective aid in their efforts to defeat the IEDs comes from Israel. The ministering angels who are working to extricate Bush from his distress are,

thus, Daniel, Nuriel and Rafael. The last-named is not a person but a corporation: the Armament Development Authority. A bit of Rafael's activity to protect U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan was revealed last summer in the form of a report that the U.S. Army was acquiring anti-explosives protection kits manufactured jointly by Rafael and the U.S. firm General Dynamics. Other activity is classified.

Votel is one of the officers whom the U.S. Army is proud to present to the public in interviews and in Congressional hearings. In his previous rank, as a colonel, Votel was commanding officer of the elite unit of the American ground forces, the 75th Rangers Brigade – in IDF terms: the Paratroop commandos (sayeret), but 10 times the size. Votel's Rangers landed in Afghanistan in 2001 and captured an airport, known as Camp Rhino, which then became the landing base for the forces that took Kandahar and Kabul. Afterward Votel led the Rangers in the Iraq war, until he was assigned to head a task force to combat the IEDs. As a former Ranger, Votel initially contacted Brigadier General Yossi Hyman, the IDF's chief infantry and Paratroops officer. At Hyman's initiative, the Engineering Corps and Army Headquarters were placed in charge of handling Votel's team.

Votel received an annual budget of \$1.2 billion and a promotion to the rank of general. His staff, which at first consisted of units from the army only, was expanded to include representatives of the marines, the special forces, the air force and the navy. The most senior levels, all the way up to deputy secretary of defense – at the time Paul Wolfowitz and now Gordon England – listened attentively, in gross contrast to the contempt being shown by the office of Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz to the warnings of Colonel (res.) Yossi Langotsky concerning the tunnels being dug by the Palestinians (and perhaps by Hezbollah as well).

The mobilization to fight against the IEDs reflected the gravity of the problem but did not solve it. True, fewer IEDs are striking their targets, but the results remain brutal and intolerable: three of every five people killed in Iraq in the past few months were killed by IEDs, planted either on the ground or in booby-trapped vehicles. The enemies of the Americans prepare the devices so that the explosion launches burning-hot armor-penetrating lead projectiles, and even if the soldiers' personal protection, ceramic vests and their like that block Kalashnikov bullets and fragments, saves their upper body, their limbs and other organs are in danger of being mortally wounded.

In the spring of 2004 every exploded device in Iraq caused casualties. This year only one in four explosions have caused casualties, but the absolute numbers of the losses is constantly accumulating. The British commander of the Basra and southern Iraq zone, Major General James Dutton, has had 18 of his troops killed by IEDs in the last three months.

A concealed mistress

It is dangerous to move about in Iraq in an American or British uniform, and frightening to serve there in a bomb disposal unit. Last month, National Defense, the monthly magazine of the U.S. National Defense Industrial Association, which has been persistent in covering the developments in combating IEDs, reported that the U.S. Navy's bomb disposal unit, which was called in to reinforce the army forces and the marines, is not succeeding in manning one-sixth of its available positions. Members of bomb disposal units get extra pay for danger, parachuting and diving, totaling \$625 a month. To tempt them to remain in career service, if they have accumulated at least six years of experience, the navy offers them a grant of \$45,000 upon signing the contract.

In one of its recent visits to Israel, a delegation from Votel's task force spent three days touring IDF units, guided by the chief engineering officer of Northern Command and with the emphasis on the Engineering Corps' Yahalom unit, a special-operations force. The U.S. Army maintains frequent and regular contacts with the IDF.

The IDF takes pride in this. The U.S. Army is ashamed, citing outdated and transparent pretexts – what will the Arabs say? – which are unable to conceal professional embarrassment. This is not a matter of joint operational planning or intelligence secrets; it is a matter of saving lives – American lives – an issue that is the epicenter of the concern of politicians in Washington. However, instead of congratulating themselves about know-how that was acquired with the blood of the IDF soldiers who were killed in Lebanon and the territories and which is the property of the entire Israeli public, Israeli politicians – the latest of them was Mofaz in his visit to Washington a week ago – are willing to forgo the status of common-law wife and make do with the appearance of a concealed mistress.

Officially, Centcom (U.S. Central Command) is barred from talking directly to Israel – it is supposed to do so only through Eucom (European Command?) or Washington. The prohibition is usually maintained, but life-and-death issues override it. Centcom despaired of the bureaucracy, while soldiers are being killed every day, and three officers who are serving in Iraq came to Israel to learn from the IDF how to combat IEDs. There are also Israeli combatants in Iraq who were released from the IDF to enlist in the U.S. Army. These are not two-footed warriors but members of Oketz, the IDF's canine unit, whose American trainers came to the unit's base to learn how to work with the dogs.

A problem of stars

In the best tradition of official Washington doublespeak, even as Israel was requested to say nothing, the Pentagon decided to mention the Israeli angle, to prove that no stone is being left unturned in the effort to defeat the IEDs. A week ago the Los Angeles Times reported that the lone star worn by Votel is making it difficult for him to move along the corridors of the Pentagon. A more senior officer is needed, a three-star general. This is a peculiar idea: another two pieces of serrated tin on a general's shoulder and the explosive devices will be gone. The navy respects expertise and experience, the army respects ranks, the commander of the navy's bomb disposal unit was quoted as saying in National Defense. Maybe it will be Lieutenant General Russel Honore, who gained glory in commanding his troops in post-Katrina New Orleans. Honore, who commands the reserve units and National Guard forces being sent to Iraq and Afghanistan, was outraged that the soldiers' training does not include sufficient preparation to deal with the IEDs.

In a self-defensive press briefing at the Pentagon, Lieutenant General James Conway, the director of operations on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that supreme priority has been assigned to combat the IEDs. "The only remaining effective tool Iraqi insurgency has against coalition forces is the improvised bomb," Conway said, and once U.S. and coalition forces find a way to eliminate IEDs, "it's over." The "it" in question is the campaign in Iraq, but before that happens, Conway confirmed it has been proposed to appoint a three-star general above Votel - like Conway's rank - to oversee IED work.

To prove the Americans are learning from the best and most experienced sources, Conway noted that the British had encountered the problem of explosive devices in Northern Ireland and the Israelis have coped with suicide bombers in Israel and Lebanon. "We've tried to study what their experiences were and learn from that." Dutton, the British general, added another piece of information which explains why it is vital to draw on the knowledge the IDF gleaned coping with Hezbollah devices: the materials and the technology used in making IEDs are entering Iraq from the same source - Iran.

Votel and his colleagues reviewed in public a range of systems and stratagems in use by the enemies of the Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan: detonation by wireless, by tripwire, by remote control of cars and by dog and sheep carcasses. Thousands of disruptive systems have been supplied to the forces, but according to reports these also disrupt the U.S. forces' communication network, so the soldiers tend to shut them off. Another difficulty the U.S. has is collecting accurate data about the attacks perpetrated by the IEDs, such as the time of the detonation, the location of the device and the situation of the force that was attacked. An analysis of this data in southern Lebanon helped the IDF improve its combat tactics against Hezbollah.

The key to booby-trapped cars

The key to the booby-trapped cars, an Israeli officer told his American colleagues, lies in mapping the fleet of vehicles in Iraq and marking them in a way that makes it possible to spot them from a safe distance and to identify suspicious vehicles which were not present along the route earlier. The weak point of the Americans is the movement on the roads, for patrols or in convoys. The U.S. Army also understood it is essential to train all logistics personnel and drivers as riflemen who are liable to encounter an attack aimed at killing or kidnapping them, and just to be on the safe side, a simulator for practicing responses in convoys was upgraded.

A soldier who is not present is not hurt, and the original sin of the U.S. Army in Iraq, in its mission to protect the emerging regime in Baghdad, is its failure to develop "control without presence" - a swift action, sparing in manpower and focused, that achieves results without banking on large-scale presence that eventually becomes bankruptcy. The IDF learned how to do this, on an impressive albeit not absolute scale, in its activity against Palestinian terrorism in the West Bank. This is a decentralized combat doctrine, on which the copyright belongs, in part, to the former commander of the Israel Navy, Rear Admiral (res.) Yedidya Yaari, now the president of Rafael.

In the area of combating explosive devices, and in other areas as well, the IDF and sophisticated defense corporations in Israeli industry are so far ahead of their American counterparts that self-admiration needs to be cooled with a doze of modesty; it is not that the Israeli ability is small but that the American needs are large. "The new brigade that is equipped with the Striker combat vehicle is responsible for an area of 38,000 square kilometers in Iraq, almost twice the size of Israel," a realistic IDF officer said this week, "and without diminishing the importance of the lessons we learned and taught others from convoys of eight kilometers to the Beaufort and to the Dlaat outpost [in Lebanon], their convoys have to cover 80 and sometimes 180 kilometers. So we, with all respect, are a drop in the ocean."

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