

Marines to train at new Israeli combat center

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Posted : Monday Jun 25, 2007 16:21:25 EDT

BALADIA CITY, Israel — In a new, elaborate training center in the Negev desert, Israeli troops — and someday, U.S. Marines and soldiers — are preparing for the wide range of urban scenarios they may confront.

Here, at Israel's new National Urban Training Center, the Israeli Defense Force's Ground Forces Command is preparing forces to fight in four theaters: Gaza, Lebanon, the West Bank and Syria.

Built by the Army Corps of Engineers and funded largely from U.S. military aid, the 7.4-square-mile generic city — balad, in Arabic, means village — consists of 1,100 basic modules that can be reconfigured by mission planners to represent specific towns.

It's a much smaller, IDF-tailored version of the Army's Joint Readiness Training Center, the sprawling 100,000-acre simulated microcosm of the Middle East used to train infantry brigade task forces deployed in the region. And while Baladia City won't feature all the pyrotechnic bells and whistles of the Fort Polk, La., facility, it will offer the same high-fidelity simulated battlefield technologies, force identification and location systems, and debriefing capabilities, officers here said.

"Combat units from platoon up to brigade level will train in an environment that simulates the real urban battle," said Brig. Gen. Uzi Moskovich, commander of the NUTC and its adjacent National Ground Training Center, Israel's downsized version of the Army's force-on-force training facility at Fort Irwin, Calif. "Enemy forces will fight according to their respective combat doctrines, and the civilian population will behave in ways typical of their particular community, religion and culture."

Moskovich said Baladia City would eventually host Army and Marine Corps units for training before they head to Iraq.

"This is something developed by us in cooperation with the U.S. Army; we intend for it to become a valuable center of knowledge that will also benefit our American allies and other friends," he said.

An Israeli budget official said total Baladia City program costs came in at less than \$45 million, a small fraction of Washington's investment in the JRTC. As a frame of reference, he estimated each weeklong brigade-size exercise at a few thousand dollars, while major drills at JRTC could run into the millions.

"In terms of cost versus effectiveness, this is the best investment we've made in the army in the past 10 years," said Moskovich, who also commands the IDF's Gaza division. "This facility will be unique in the world, even with regard to the U.S. Army. It's not the size, but the added value of the different terrains, the fine-tuning of the cultural environments and the debriefing capabilities."

LESSONS FROM LEBANON

Located at the Tze'elim training base less than nine miles east of Rafah, a terrorist-ridden smugglers' haven that straddles the Gaza-Egyptian border, Baladia naturally resembles the sandy, arid terrain of the Palestinian coastal strip. At the moment, however, Lebanon and Syria are the highest-priority threat theaters, and creative engineering is required to transform the area into what IDF officers here call "Hezbollahland."

"We have the capabilities to create a realistic representation of where we're most likely to fight," Moskovich said. "Give me 70 or 80 tractors for a month, and I'll re-create the hills and topography of a Lebanese village. It won't be identical, but it will be enough to provide the type of realistic training our forces require. It might not be politically correct, but we're not pretending here. What looks like a mosque is a mosque. And our people will impersonate Arabs, not the Swiss. We need them to act the way our enemies are likely to fight on their own home turf."

During a late-May visit, IDF planners were busy transforming large portions of Baladia City into Bint Jbeil, a Hezbollah stronghold from which extremist Shiite forces extracted a heavy price on IDF ground troops in last summer's Lebanon War.

The area now features a city center, complete with shops, a grand mosque, hospital and an old casbah quarter built with 5-foot-thick walls. It even has a cemetery that doubles as a soccer field, depending on operational scenario.

Hundreds of soldiers, most of them 19- and 20-year-old women, graduates of

Arabic language and cultural programs, are play-acting civilians and enemy fighters. Others serve as representatives of the Red Cross, other humanitarian aid organizations and the international media.

Designed according to lessons from the recent Lebanon War, side streets and main passageways will bristle with improvised explosive devices, while snipers will man the rooftops of multistory apartment buildings positioned throughout the town. Of course, IDF soldiers will have to contend with underground bunkers and the so-called nature reserves, those foliage-camouflaged, often remotely activated Katyusha rocket launching sites that confounded Israeli airpower and ground forces up until the last day of the war.

“The threat can come from anywhere,” said the director of the tactical training center’s urban warfare branch, a lieutenant colonel, who asked that his name not be used. “We learned from Lebanon that anti-tank missiles and rockets can be launched from windows of residential buildings or from public places, like schools and community centers.”

THE MALI

Known by its Hebrew acronym MALI, the Baladia City NUTC features 472 structures, 1,200 doorways, 2,500 windows, multiple elevator shafts, and four miles of paved streets and semi-paved roads. For added realism, charred automobiles and burned tires litter the roadways. In the near future, planners will add donkeys, sheep, dogs and other live animals that often provide early warning of approaching Israeli troops.

Besides conquering and controlling a city, infantry will practice rescue operations, logistics crews will train in weapon storage, and entire battalions and brigades will drill combined air-land precision operations with the Israeli air force.

“In urban warfare, the first lesson is that things take time,” the lieutenant colonel said. “If the troops need half a day to advance five to 10 meters, so be it. The key is to conquer the city in a methodically selective and surgical manner so that harm to uninvolved civilians is kept to a minimum.”

Aside from meticulous mission planning, troops and especially commanders must maintain a continuously high level of situational awareness. To this end, significant attention will focus on selecting homes on the outskirts of town best suited to serve as forward command posts.

Ideally, the urban warfare director said, such homes should be located on an elevation that is clear of vegetation and not completely isolated, but with very few neighbors. Moreover, family members must not play any type of prominent role in the local community.

“Determining a forward command location ... can often make or break the entire battle,” the officer said. “The battalion commander must always be in the front; he has to have the benefit of being close to the fight. As for brigade commanders, it’s a matter of judgment. At times, he may need to remain further in the rear. But here, we urge them to be as forward deployed as possible. Remember, what you see here during the day doesn’t even resemble what it looks like at night.”

In the coming months, Baladia City will be integrated into the army’s Tzayad, or Hunter, secure digital network. The facility also will be enveloped by cameras, illuminator locators, a public address system, controlled street lights and an elaborate audio system that simulates helicopters, mortar rounds, muezzin prayer calls and 20 other distinct sounds.

Maj. Miki Winkler, director of the tactical training center that manages all Baladia City communications and debriefings, said commanders will view all activity in hyper-speed, where one minute of battle translates into one second of after-action review: “Everything is recorded. Every person is a stand-alone sensor and every floor of every building is an illuminator.”

Principal contractors include Israel’s state-owned Rafael and San Diego-based Cubic Defense Applications, provider of the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System, a lightweight, wireless vest that contains laser detectors to track and record soldier performance. Cubic also will provide, under a Pentagon Foreign Military Sales contract, PC-based range instrumentation and an infrared system for indoor/outdoor tracking, said Jan Stevens, the company’s corporate communications manager.

OUT-OF-THE-BOX THINKING

Moskovich hopes to declare Baladia City initially operational by the end of July or early August, with full capability scheduled for Jan. 1 — not bad, he said, for a complex, bilateral program that began with “out-of-the-box” thinking by a midlevel officer just five years ago.

“We broke ground in March 2005, but it all started with one of our battalion commanders, who made us realize we had to provide a better answer to the unique challenges of urban warfare,” Moskovich said.

IDF officers credit Amir Baram, then a lieutenant colonel commanding the 890 Battalion, with changing the nature of the nation’s ground force tactical training program. At the time, in March 2002, Baram was assigned a key role in taking over Nablus, a hotbed of Palestinian terrorism behind a string of suicide bombings that triggered Defensive Shield, Israel’s largest military operation in the West Bank since the 1967 Six-Day War.

With nowhere to train his forces in the type of house-to-house warfare needed for the mission, Baram turned to a prominent Israeli real estate developer, who allowed the battalion to drill at night at an unfinished residential complex.

“They drilled on real structures, with entryways, windows and elevator shafts,” said Uri Dori, a retired IDF brigade commander. “It must have helped, because the battle in Nablus is now considered practically a textbook example of successful urban warfare.”

Two combat battalions and one supporting battalion took part in that 17-day siege, first controlling the city’s Balata refugee camp and then systematically pushing the terrorists into the casbah, where they were simultaneously attacked from multiple directions.

Fighting in the casbah took an entire weekend, with troops circumventing explosives-rigged alleyways and “breaking the geometry by literally bursting through walls, penetrating in zigzag, wormlike fashion,” noted Brig. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, Nablus division commander at the time.

The result, Kochavi said, was 74 armed terrorists killed, 155 civilians injured and 480 taken prisoner, as opposed to two Israelis killed and 19 injured. Palestinian officials and humanitarian organizations dispute these statistics, maintaining that several hundred civilians were injured or killed in the Nablus siege.

Since last summer, Baladia City has hosted 85 drills using what Moskovich calls “stupid buildings.” But after everything comes online in January, the commander says he’ll fix his sights on two new growth areas: developing a home-based Red Team and developing the city’s environs for ingressive training.

“Most of the casualties we suffered in Lebanon were at the contours of built-up areas,” he said. “When our units entered villages, most of them knew what to do. But what we learned is that urban warfare actually begins two to three kilometers from the outskirts of the city itself.”

As for Baladia City’s dedicated opposing force, Moskovich said the role-playing force already constitutes the beginnings of a home-based Red Team.

“There’s almost a weekly struggle to provide the opposing forces,” he said. “Right now, we have two blue sides, which puts the training conductor in a bind, since he’s obligated to both sides and has to satisfy their respective drill requirements.”

Moskovich estimates it would cost \$100,000 a year to maintain a professional opposing force, with its own uniforms, vehicles, weapons and pyrotechnics: “I’m not talking about a brigade or even a battalion. I’ll be more than happy with a reinforced company.”

Recent developments in Syria may make it necessary to give Moskovich more than that. Syria is developing specialized infantry battalions trained in the type of guerrilla warfare waged so successfully by Hezbollah in last summer’s war, a military intelligence source said.

And with the “reasonable likelihood” of another war on Israel’s northern front — perhaps by summer’s end, according to some intelligence estimates here — that Red Team force may not come soon enough.