



## Israeli Special Operations Forces- An Overview

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The origins of Israel's Special Operations Forces (SOF) predate the establishment of the state in 1948. Under the Ottoman Turks, Jewish settlers began establishing local defense organizations such as "Hashomer" (the Guard) who adopted Bedouin customs, wore Bedouin outfits and preferred to fight on horseback. Hashomer served as the foundation of the nationwide defense organization, the "Haganah" (Defense) which was established during the British Mandate in Palestine (1917-1948). The latter, in turn, became the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) upon the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. However, probably the first Jewish equivalent of what we now know as SOF, was actually formed by the British during WWII.<sup>1</sup>

New threats were looming as the forces of Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps, were approaching Egypt and the Vichy regime seized control of Syria and Lebanon in early 1941. Feeling besieged, the British felt that they needed the cooperation of the Jewish population in Palestine. The British collaborated with the Jewish defense organization, the Haganah, to create a commando force of scouts and raiders, the "Palmach" (an acronym for "Striking Companies"). Companies of the Palmach were used as reconnaissance units during the British invasion of Vichy Lebanon in 1942. After the end of the Second World War the Palmach became illegal and went underground to fight as a guerrilla force against both the British forces and Palestinian Arabs. The Palmach units were later merged into the IDF in 1948 and its commanders set the standard for leadership and fighting spirit of the IDF in the 1947-1949 War of Independence.<sup>2</sup>

One of the commanders of the original companies of the Palmach was Moshe Dayan with his famous trademark black eyepatch. Dayan lost his eye in a skirmish while serving as a scout at the head of a British force invading French Vichy. Recovering from his injury Dayan was ready for action again in 1948. His former mentor and Palmach commander, Yitzchak Sadeh asked him to establish a mobile reconnaissance, raiding and intelligence gathering unit modeled and inspired by the famous British units who operated in the North Africa campaign, such as Sterling's SAS, the Long-Range Desert Group (LRDG) and Popski's Private Army.



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## Israeli Special Operations Forces- An Overview

Dayan's raiding battalion became known as "Battalion 89".<sup>3</sup> During a short visit to the United States, he met and took the advice of Abraham Baum a decorated Jewish American officer who served under General George C. Patton and led a daring raiding force, "Task Force Baum", deep behind the German lines. Following Baum's advice Dayan led Battalion 89 in a few daring raids, the most famous one was the raid on Lydda (Lod) today next to Israel's main international airport.

After 1949 and the end of the independence war the IDF disbanded many units and many of its experienced officers left service. Hence the postwar IDF was established with no elite forces but for a single and small British-style paratrooper battalion of very modest attainments, and a small if highly effective unit of sea commandos that had sunk Egypt's flagship in 1948. However, the IDF soon had to respond to a new irregular threat on the state's border when infiltrators started crossing the un-demarcated and unfenced Armistice Lines into Israeli territory sometimes only to harvest their own lost fields, but also to steal, rob and kill. At times, sizeable gangs came for both plunder and revenge. When increased patrols and other defense measures proved useless, the IDF decided to embark on series of reprisal raids in 1951. However, none of the existing infantry units who carried out the raids were successful in completing their mission, demonstrating in the process poor leadership and sub-professional standards. The solution was to form a new unit that would specialize in raiding, known as Unit 101. To lead the unit a young and dashing officer was selected, Major Arik Sharon who in later years will become one of Israel's most successful generals.

The unit served as a laboratory for new techniques and tactics and was given the freedom to experiment and innovate. Its members became legends in the army and other units aspired to imitate them. Mosh Dayan, then the IDF Chief

of Staff decided on a brilliant move, to merge the small unit with a larger unit and thereafter use the new amalgamated unit as a vehicle to transform the culture of the entire IDF from the clumsy low-spirited army it had become into a force with a 'can do' spirit, both agile and combat ready. Indeed, the merger with the single battalion of paratroopers was successful. Sharon became the paratroopers' commander and many of Unit 101's officers became company commanders and assumed other leadership roles in the battalion. Soon the battalion became a brigade, and its tactics, and more important combat spirit, were transferred to the other IDF units. When the IDF went to war against Egypt in 1956 it was ready and the paratroopers led the way in a combat drop next to the Suez Canal.

Unit 101 set the tone for all future IDF SOF units for years to come and exhibited many of the characteristics of Israel's contemporary SOF:

- Units are constantly formed, developed and dissolved often to resurface as new units according to emergent threats, challenges and technology (with the top tier units as exceptions).
- SOF personnel serve as role models and sources of inspiration for other units.
- SOF are leaders in innovation, creating a laboratory for experimentation in weapons and tactics that later diffuse into and influence the larger army.
- Units develop leaders and officers that after a period of service in the SOF disperse into other units and are expected to enhance professionalism and leadership standards in the entire IDF.

At present, the IDF has a wide variety of SOF units that are either territorially specialized (such as the mountainous north, arid south, or the highly urbanized center of the country); or functionally specialized for

## Israeli Special Operations Forces- An Overview

intelligence infiltration, long-range reconnaissance, long-range strikes, undercover operations, and tunnel warfare.

The IDF tier one units are Sayeret Matkal, Sayeret Shaldag, Shayetet 13 (the naval commandos) and the Airborne Combat Rescue and Evacuation Unit 669.<sup>4</sup> Matkal, akin the British SAS and inspired by it, reporting directly to the IDF General Staff is probably the most famous IDF unit. The high point of the unit's international fame, was the Entebbe Operation (July 1976) to rescue 100 passengers and 12 Air France crewmembers held by seven hijackers and some one hundred Ugandan troops in an old terminal of Entebbe airport.<sup>5</sup> Its sisters' units are the Navy's Shayetet 13, akin to the US Navy Seals, and the Israeli Air Force (IAF) unit Shaldag and the Airborne Combat Rescue and Evacuation Unit 669. Each of these units have their own specialty but they frequently train together and often join other forces.

Tier two includes three units until recently independent under the loose supervision of the Chief Infantry Officer, and under the operational control of one of the three regional commands for the North, Center and South. In 2015 they were all placed under the single headquarters of the newly formed 89th Commando Brigade. It was hoped that the brigade could function as a cohesive combat force when required, while still retaining the special expertise and ethos of each of its different units.

One under-cover unit, Duvdevan, includes counterinsurgency specialists who operate disguised as Arabs. Another, the Maglan Unit 212 for deep rear intrusions and actions in distant places appeals to would-be explorers, while the current Egoz Unit specializes in operations in the wooded terrain of the north and has acquired importance in opposing Hizbullah, Israel's most active antagonist. Another unit in tier two is the canine Oketz force comprising the dog handlers that have become an integral part of almost every SOF mission.

Tier three of special operations units includes the recon brigade forces such as Sayeret Golani, Sayeret 35 (of the paratroopers brigade) and a few other units belonging to the elite infantry and armor brigades. In addition, there are a few highly specialized units in reserve, mostly veterans of tier one and two units such as the Alpinist Unit trained for the snowy slopes and ice peaks of Mount Hermon (when local snow is insufficient, the unit is sent to train in the Alps). Another is Lotar Eilat recruited in that Red Sea town as a quick-reaction, local counter-infiltration and hostage-rescue force. Finally, there is Yahalom of the Combat Engineering Corps which focuses on high-tech tunnel warfare in addition to its IED and ordnance disposal duties and more prosaic obstacle breaching and demolitions.<sup>6</sup>

One major distinction between the IDF's SOF and those of other countries is their recruiting and selection model. The top SOF units around the world are manned by experienced career soldiers, who first serve a few years in regular army or marines' units. Volunteers from various units then go through rigorous screening and only a few are selected. The IDF, by contrast, relies on young conscripts for all its combat forces, including its special operations' units. Competition to serve in elite units upon enlistment is fierce among young high school students – only admission to air force flight training is equal in prestige. To improve their chances of selection, many young Israelis join special pre-army preparation programs to upgrade their physical fitness and learn army ways.

Once future conscripts inform the IDF of their desire to volunteer for a special unit and are found to have the minimum physical and mental requirements, they are summoned to an army base for a "Yom Sayarot", a Special Forces (testing) Day. It amounts to a series of physical and mental tests that determine who among the many young candidates qualifies for further admission tests for the IDF's

## Israeli Special Operations Forces- An Overview

top tier units. Those who pass are sent for another week of physical and mental tests (Gibush – try-out), with the highest scorers sent to the Gibbush Matkal for the top-tier units. Psychological character and stability tests are integral to the process and play an important part in it.

The initial training of the conscripts who are admitted to one of the top-tier elite units lasts roughly twenty-two months, and is the longest initial training course in the IDF except for air force pilots and naval officers. Training includes the basic infantry training foundations and fieldcraft with an emphasis on field navigation in different terrains, counterinsurgency basics, air to ground cooperation, airborne operations, intelligence gathering, sharpshooter instruction, medical training and more. The young recruits lack of experience compared to their counterparts in the West is somewhat offset, even if not entirely, by the frequency they see action and by the very high level of human capital they possess. Upon returning to civilian life most of them will eventually become leaders in different areas of life: physicians, academics, industry leaders, or politicians for example. Their presence is felt everywhere in Israeli society. Another factor that offsets their young age is a very high involvement of more experienced officers who often assume roles that would be considered as relevant to NCOs or experienced operators in the West.

The latest addition to the long list of special IDF units was established in 2020 with the mission of overcoming traditional barriers between units and services thus becoming a truly network centric force that can optimize and synchronize the use of firepower and intelligence in the service of the SOF operator. This “Ghost Unit” who formed by Chief of Staff LTG Aviv Kochavi to function as an elite but non-specialized combat unit whose personnel are collectively familiar with the capabilities and limitations of all IDF components, and whose

mission is to select and integrate the most relevant capabilities for any given combat task at hand. The unit’s mission is to harness the latest technologies (such as cyber capabilities and robotics) so as to bring to bear everything the IDF has to offer at any one point in time to execute the mission at hand.<sup>7</sup> The unit seeks operators who combine the unique combination of good physical ability, fighting skills and other traditional SOF requirements with technological savvy. By definition the unit is multiservice and multidimensional: working on land, at sea, and in the air and cyber domains. It well expresses the dynamic and adaptive nature of the IDF’s SOF.<sup>8</sup>

The significance of Israeli SOF for similar units in other democratic militaries lies in their particular form of organizational adaptation combining three principles. First, the principle that SOF can be dissolved and reconstituted in multiple forms allows the IDF to constantly experiment with new SOF as circumstances change. Second, the assumption that Israeli SOF leaders who continue in service will be assigned throughout the IDF is a mechanism assuring that the professional expertise garnered by SOF will disseminate throughout the whole force. Third, Israeli SOF, and especially the “Ghost Unit” are a model for the multiservice and multidimensional operational mode that militaries around the world are now developing.

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## Israeli Special Operations Forces- An Overview

### Endnotes

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