

14 Special forces, ethos and technology

The case of Israel's Haruv Reconnaissance Unit

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Introduction

This chapter analyzes Sayeret Haruv – the ‘Carob’ Reconnaissance Unit operating between 1966 and 1974 as a special unit directly linked to the Central Command of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It specialized in anti-terrorism, counter-terrorism, and commando missions in the Jordan valley between the Dead Sea and south of the Sea of Galilee. In only a few years the unit evolved into an elite force marked by the independent and selective recruitment of volunteer conscripts. At its height, it specialized in new modes of action, including cooperation with the air force (helicopters and airplanes) and navy (for attacks from the Dead Sea), and new types of equipment. It also developed a doctrine for hot, or armed, pursuit (Erez and Edelist 1983: 94).

The reasons for focusing on Haruv as a ‘special force’ center on three processes characterizing such units. First, an exploration of how new technologies developed and adopted within the unit sheds light on the way special operations forces (SOF) form semi-independent ‘laboratories’ with direct links to strategic-level decision makers and external contractors. These allow for speedy development and implementation of new weapons systems that are then disseminated to the ‘regular’ force. Many have noted this fact, but how does it really work? How can we theorize these processes?

Second, the case of Haruv exemplifies the emergence of a noticeable feature of SOF: restraint in using armed force. Haruv underwent a shift from ‘Follow Me!’ in waging combat, in which (sometimes very senior) commanders aggressively dashed into an engagement at the head of their forces, to a new restrained ethos of encirclement of the enemy and the preferred use of stand-off weaponry (recoilless guns, tanks or helicopters). This was much more than a simple tactical shift: it went much deeper to a move from an aggressive stance to a classic SOF maneuver, based on control, self-limitation and an effective use of minimal force. This significant transformation entailed a change of assumptions about what good soldiering and professionalism mean. In anthropological terms, what happened is that, for the IDF in general and the unit in particular, a new emotionally-charged ‘key scenario’ of combat emerged.

Third, the case of Haruv, which is not well known outside Israel, exemplifies how the reputation of SOF gradually emerges out of successes and failures, the support of mentors, ritual and symbolic features constructing its exclusiveness, and its place in popular culture.

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The historical data available for this unit allow us to chart out the gradual emergence of a special 'name', and a professional standing, out of the circumstances of the period.

A note on data. We utilize data from interviews with commanders of the unit carried out during 2007–2008 and 2014, from the unit's website (<http://www.484.co.il>), and from other primary and secondary sources.