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What the Pentagon Can Learn from the IDF

Trading structure for speed

OR YEARS, military doctrine in the United States and Israel rested on a powerful but flawed assumption: that clear superiority of arms would deter conflict or, failing that, bring wars to a swift and successful conclusion. The wars of this century have invalidated that belief. From Afghanistan to Iraq, Ukraine to Yemen, and Gaza to Lebanon, contemporary conflict has become more drawn-out, more fast-paced, more fragmented, and more technologically diffuse. Precision weapons and unmanned systems are proliferating. Warning times are shorter. Deterrence, while still desirable, cannot rest on military superiority alone.

Over the past two years, Israel has confronted this emerging reality directly, often on multiple fronts at once. It has been forced to

operate in an environment where superiority is temporary, mobilization is immediate, and adaptation cannot wait for postwar analysis. Training, doctrine, and operational practice are tightly linked through feedback loops, on not only fast recovery from colossal failure but also how quickly the impact of initial success diminishes. Lessons learned on one front are absorbed and applied elsewhere in near-real time. The emphasis is on relevance rather than perfection.

For the United States — whose defense institutions, though still unmatched in scale, often struggle with speed — learning from the Israeli experience is particularly important as strategic competition with China intensifies.

China's rise as a military and technological competitor to the United States has reshaped the global strategic environment. Beijing is investing heavily in artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, space capabilities, quantum technologies, and military-civil fusion, deliberately shortening the distance between commercial innovation and battlefield deployment. This approach challenges a core American advantage: the assumption that technological leadership, once achieved, can be maintained through scale and spending alone.

The risk for the United States is not that it will fall behind overnight but that its innovation and procurement cycles will move more slowly than those of China. Large platforms such as Ford-class aircraft carriers, exquisite systems such as the F-35 jet, and lengthy acquisition timelines (the first vessel of the new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines is expected to take more than 10 years to build) were designed for an era of strategic dominance and early warning. They are ill-suited to an era of persistent competition, rapid iteration, and consistently contested domains.

In this context, preserving America's technological edge is less about inventing the next breakthrough technology or building the next best-in-class weapon system and more about institutionalizing faster learning, experimentation, and adaptation. This is where Israel's recent experience and its defense-innovation ecosystem become strategically relevant.

Israel's culture of defense innovation is shaped not by abundance but by constraint and necessity. Limited manpower, finite budgets, and existential stakes have produced an ecosystem that prizes modularity, rapid prototyping, and operational relevance. Engineers, operators, and commanders work in close proximity. Technologies are stress-tested in real conditions and refined continuously. The Iron Dome missile defense system, to take just one example, took just four years between development and deployment.

Over the past two years, Israel's multifront conflict environment has only accelerated these dynamics. New threats — such as mass rocket fire, drones, cyber disruption, and information warfare — forced rapid adjustments in systems, concepts, and organizational practices. The result was not a single technological "solution" but a pattern of continuous adaptation.

This approach contrasts with the American system, where innovation is often fragmented, siloed, and sequential: Development, testing, procurement, and deployment occur in discrete stages, often separated by years. The American system excels at producing world-class capabilities, but it struggles to produce and update them at the pace that modern conflict demands. There's a reason why the United States still flies 1950s-era B-52 bombers as it awaits new B-21 stealth bombers, which have now been in development and testing for more than a decade.

The lesson here is not that the United States should wholly abandon its model but that it should complement it. Israel's experience offers insights into how large defense institutions can shorten feed-

back loops, integrate operators into innovation processes, and prioritize relevance over optimization.

Historically, U.S.-Israel defense cooperation has been deep but largely transactional. The relationship has centered on intelligence-sharing, joint weapons development, and procurement. These are highly valuable domains, but they're typically episodic and bounded by specific programs. Above all, the relationship has rested on longstanding U.S. military assistance through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) framework, reflected in multiyear memoranda of understanding and Israel's procurement of major, high-end U.S. platforms such as the F-35. Notably, Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent visit to Miami for meetings with President Trump reportedly included discussions about moving beyond a model centered on military assistance and toward one grounded in joint cooperation on advanced research and development.

Strategic competition with China underscores the need for a deeper and more durable framework: a model of joint learning and innovation that treats defense R&D as a continuous, shared process rather than a collection of discrete projects.

Such a framework would not seek to replicate Israeli methods wholesale. Nor would it come at the expense of American strategic autonomy. Rather, it would establish structured pathways for co-development, experimentation, and mutual adaptation, particularly in areas where speed and integration are decisive. These can include:

- AI-enabled decision support;
- Counter-drone and autonomous defense systems;
- Resilient command-and-control capable of operating under cyber, space, and kinetic attack;

- Regional and global space-domain awareness and early warning.

Israel's defense R&D institutions, closely integrated with operational units, offer practical experience in how such capabilities evolve under sustained pressure. For the United States, engaging Israel as a joint learning partner in these domains could accelerate innovation cycles and narrow the gap between conceptual development and operational deployment.

One of the most consequential differences between the U.S. armed forces and the IDF is not technological sophistication; it's learning speed.

The IDF assumes that the next conflict will begin before the last one has been fully understood (or even finished). As a result, learning is embedded in operations rather than deferred to postwar analysis. Training, doctrine, and experimentation evolve continuously, informed by real-time experience.

An illustration of this learning process emerged early in the Gaza war. As fighting intensified with Hamas inside the tunnel system, the IDF figured out that Hamas's subterranean infrastructure functioned as a single, interconnected network rather than in isolated shafts. It also became clear that Hamas's primary centers of gravity, command and control, production, communications, and logistics were concentrated underground. This led to a rapid doctrinal shift: from an initial focus on destroying tunnel entrances to a new operational concept centered on simultaneous above-ground and underground operations, targeting subsurface centers of gravity. Implementing this shift required entering and fighting within the tunnel network itself, demonstrating how operational friction translated directly into doctrinal adaptation in real time.

The U.S. military is oriented more toward post-conflict assess-

ment. While rigorous and methodical, this approach risks lagging behind those who adapt in real time. In an era of peer competition, learning speed itself becomes a strategic asset.

Israel's integration into U.S. Central Command (Centcom) has strategic implications beyond operational coordination. Centcom now sits at the intersection of regional defense, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and is positioned to serve as a hub for experimentation and innovation in air and missile defense, space awareness, and multi-domain integration.

Israel's experience building layered defense systems and fusing military and civilian responses under fire offers valuable insights for a region increasingly defined by saturation attacks and hybrid threats. Embedding joint experimentation and R&D efforts within this regional framework could strengthen deterrence as well as readiness.

Significantly, this approach aligns with broader U.S. efforts to counter China's strategy of integrated, state-directed innovation. Rather than competing alone, only the United States can leverage regional trusted allies to create learning networks that match the pace and coherence of its competitors.

For Jewish communal, philanthropic, and educational leaders, the U.S.-Israel relationship has always been more than transactional. It reflects shared values, shared risks, and shared responsibility for the future of both societies.

In an era of accelerating technological competition, supporting deeper collaboration in defense innovation is not merely a security issue. It is a strategic investment in relevance, ensuring that democratic societies retain the capacity to adapt, deter, and defend in an increasingly chaotic and unstable world.

Philanthropic support, policy advocacy, and intellectual engagement can all play a role in advancing frameworks that emphasize joint learning, responsible innovation, and long-term strategic resilience.

The central challenge facing the United States is no longer whether it can outspend its adversaries. It is whether it can out-learn and out-adapt them.

Israel's experience over the past two years, operating on multiple fronts under constant pressure, offers no simple answers. But it does offer something increasingly rare: real-world insight into how military institutions adapt when superiority is contested and time is scarce.

By treating Israel as a joint learning and innovation partner, the United States can explore new ways to preserve its technological edge in an age of strategic competition with China. The goal is not imitation but integration, combining American scale with Israeli adaptability.

In the conflicts ahead, power will still matter. But relevance may matter more. And relevance, above all, depends on learning together. ✳

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