

# MOUT and the 1982 Lebanon Campaign: The Israeli Approach

by Captain James D. Leaf

MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) is a topic much discussed currently within the profession of arms. The growing consensus is that U.S. forces can expect to conduct MOUT routinely in future operations, though there are still a few who doubt this.<sup>1</sup> Some analysts go so far as to predict that MOUT will dominate future operations.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the future holds, MOUT will be of increasing importance in future U.S. operations. Analysis of past urban battles, therefore, is required. Humans have fought in cities since before Joshua and the Israelites breached Jericho's walls. Cities are important, to people, governments and, therefore, armies. Americans have been fighting in or over cities since the revolution, and examining U.S. operations since the early 1980s reveals MOUT to be a significant component of each operation.<sup>3</sup> The future structure of the Army, as envisioned by the Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Shinseki, ensures that operating in urban terrain will be a common aspect of operations. The force envisioned will operate as a CONUS-based, technologically advanced, rapidly deployable force. It would most likely deploy to airfields, ports or both. This trend is already underway.<sup>4</sup> These facilities, with rare exceptions, are located in cities. Soldiers and their leaders should realize the changing status of urban terrain. No longer something to be avoided or entered reluctantly, urban terrain will be like any other, possessing unique characteristics and requiring some specialized approaches, but no longer considered any more unusual than desert or other more "traditional terrain."

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) 1982 Lebanese campaign is a historical example relevant to the U.S. Army. This campaign pitted a mechanized, technologically advanced, casualty sensitive First World army against conventional and unconventional opponents in a media-saturated, Third World urban environment.



Early versions of the Israeli Merkava tank were used in the Lebanon invasion.

Throughout the campaign, the IDF faced a paradox: move rapidly through urban and mountainous terrain to conform to a political timeline, yet inflict minimal casualties, minimize collateral damage, and sustain few casualties.<sup>5</sup> These constraints affected how the IDF would conduct the campaign and especially MOUT. Attrition battles like Manila or Aachen would not be possible.<sup>6</sup> To achieve its objectives within the parameters, the Israelis would use a combination of surprise, mass, and tactical flexibility. Generally, this approach proved successful.

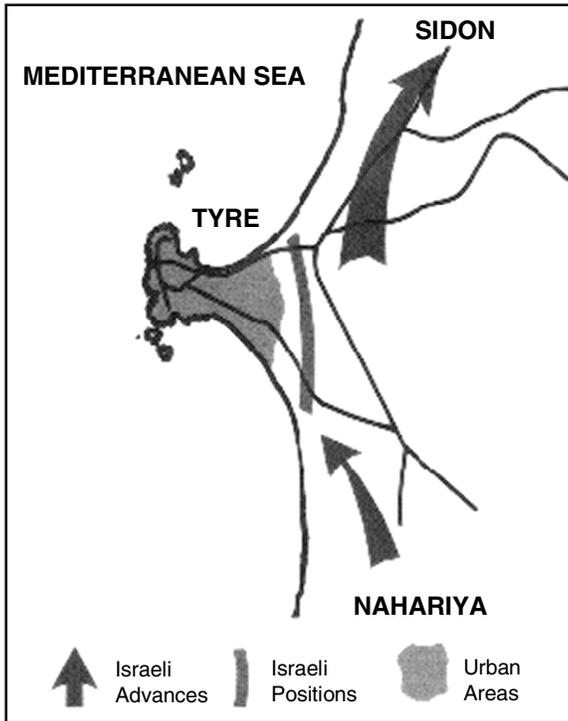
In this campaign, the IDF fought the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) and the Syrian Army. The PLO was a well-financed and armed guerrilla organization. It was equipped with a variety of Western and Soviet Bloc small arms, anti-tank weapons, and various artillery pieces, mortars, and even a few aging tanks. The Syrian Army was a relatively modern, Third World army equipped with Soviet equipment. The IDF's goal was to drive the PLO out of Lebanon and neutralize Syria's influence in Lebanon. To accomplish this, nine heavy (tank and mechanized infantry) IDF divisions

would advance into Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> These units would move rapidly. The advance elements would bypass resistance and follow-on forces would reduce bypassed enemy strongpoints. In the course of this drive north, the IDF would fight in three significant urban areas: Tyre, Sidon, and Beirut.

The first major urban battle of the campaign was in Tyre. (See Map 1) Located on a narrow peninsula, Tyre is a densely populated coastal city in southern Lebanon ringed on the east with PLO camps, considered the most likely location of PLO resistance.

The camps and the close proximity to Israel made Tyre a certain objective of the IDF. Though lasting less than two days, it illuminated how IDF MOUT tactics evolved.

An entire division attacked Tyre, surrounding it on the first day of battle. Attacking on multiple axes in conjunction with an amphibious landing; the PLO defenders were rapidly overwhelmed. Most fell back in disorder offering limited resistance, and what remained was located in the PLO camps. With Tyre surrounded, the IDF



**Map 1**  
**The Israeli advance**  
**on the coastal city of**  
**Tyre, Lebanon.**

would clear the PLO camps slowly and systematically.

The few remaining PLO positions would be cut off and reduced using infantry, direct fires from tanks and self-propelled artillery, indirect fires, naval gun fire and CAS (close air support). Fires would be discriminate, targeting specific enemy locations, limiting collateral damage and civilian loss of life.

Despite the rapid seizure of Tyre, the IDF encountered problems as it moved into the built-up areas. Initially, the infantry advanced mounted in M113 APCs, in order to keep up the pace of the advance. PLO AT (anti-tank) teams ambushed a paratroop battalion south of Tyre, wreaking havoc in the unit and the timetable. Soon IDF infantry would only move dismounted in urban areas; APCs were quickly relegated to support roles. They would ferry supplies to forward units but not venture close to elements in contact.

This was not the only factor that slowed the advance. In Tyre, Israeli civil affairs and PSYOPS were ineffective. Before moving into the city, leaflets and loudspeakers announced any impending IDF advance and advised inhabitants to move to the beaches to avoid fighting. Despite this, the IDF made no provisions for caring for the refugees or controlling their movement. Thirty thousand refugees left the city, only to return to it days later.<sup>8</sup> These movements clogged the roads, slowing

the IDF advance and providing cover for withdrawing PLO forces. The urban areas and the restrictive ROE (Rules of Engagement) governing their clearing meant a slow, deliberate pace. This was at odds with the politically-necessitated rapid maneuver campaign. MOUT precludes rapidity. The PLO would exploit this. In one instance, the crowds welcoming IDF forces into their village, were in fact concealing a PLO ambush. Due partly to the impact of the civilians, the PLO fighters in Tyre escaped the IDF to fight another day.

Sidon was the next major urban area the IDF encountered. (See Map 2) A large coastal city, Sidon was the capital of south Lebanon and the PLO regional headquarters. Like Tyre, heavy fighting had taken place in Sidon during the 1976 Lebanese civil war. The PLO had inflicted heavy casualties upon attacking Syrian forces attempting to seize Sidon and, in response, the Syrians razed much of the Palestinian inhabited areas. Neither outcome was feasible for the Israelis.

The IDF would use similar tactics as it used in Tyre except on a larger scale. Instead of one division, three converged on Sidon with one conducting a division-size amphibious landing north of the city. Sidon and the nearby PLO camps were attacked from three directions and rapidly surrounded. Once this was accomplished, a slow and deliberate clearing of each was conducted. Enemy positions were further subdivided and reduced using direct and

indirect fires. This method spared most areas from potential destruction.

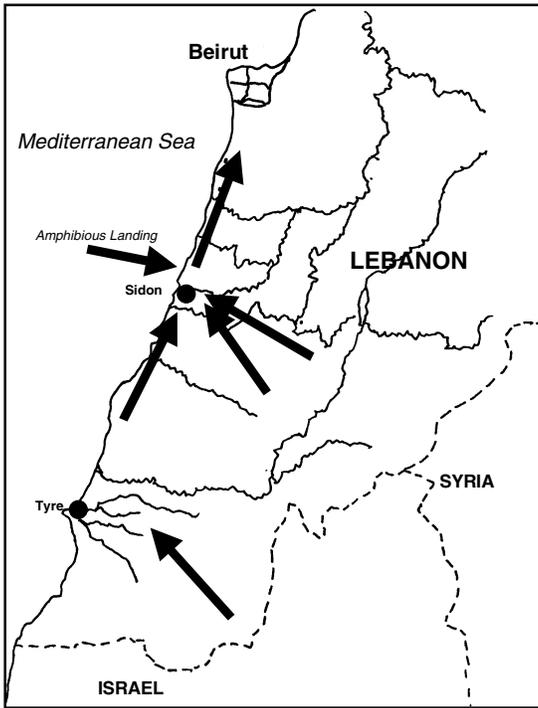
PLO defenses were similarly disorganized and piecemeal in Sidon as in Tyre. Unlike Tyre, PLO resistance when it did occur was fierce. Ambushes occurred along the coastal road south of the city. Civilians were again used to mask PLO movement and positions.

These actions slowed the IDF advance and increased the intensity of the fighting. IDF attacks into Sidon would be slow and deliberate. Despite the IDF's reputation as being a tank-oriented force, Sidon was a combined arms operation. Dismounted infantry led the way, backed by tanks, self-propelled artillery, combat engineers, indirect fires, and CAS. Fires were selective, targeting only known enemy areas. In Sidon, smoke was used extensively for the first time by the IDF. The Israelis moved slowly, block by block, through the narrow streets and alleys of the old city. In two days, the city was cleared, without a single IDF soldier killed. One casualty was the timetable. Unable to move faster due to concerns for civilian and friendly casualties, as well as clogged roads, the IDF resorted to using helicopters to move forces north of the city.

The PLO camps slowed the advance. While Sidon may have been secured, the defenders in the camps dug in.<sup>9</sup> The Israelis adapted to this change in PLO tactics. Unlike in the city, when the IDF went into the camps around Sidon, the tanks led the way.<sup>10</sup> Despite the narrow congested camp streets being potential AT ambush kill zones, the IDF believed the tanks would be needed to break through the outer defenses.

Once inside the camps the dismounted infantry took the lead. Direct and indirect fires were used liberally in the camps to reduce PLO positions than in the cities. Despite being disorganized and lacking cohesion, the PLO held out for 5 days. Because of this, casualties and property damage were much higher than in Tyre. Additionally, the PLO stand inspired further PLO resistance.

Beirut was fought on a scale even larger than Tyre or Sidon. (See Map 3) It was large, 50 square km, with over a million inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> The skyline was



**Map 2**  
The Israeli advance on Sidon.

tions. These so-called “salami” tactics, named because they sliced off small pieces of PLO-controlled territory, accomplished their goal of pushing the PLO into an ever-shrinking area.<sup>13</sup> The ground activities, combined with the most intense CAS and artillery fires of the campaign, made the PLO, after many cease-fires and negotiations, agree to leave Lebanon. The campaign was over but the IDF would remain in Lebanon. As of January 2000, the IDF continued to operate in a buffer zone along the Lebanese-Israeli border.

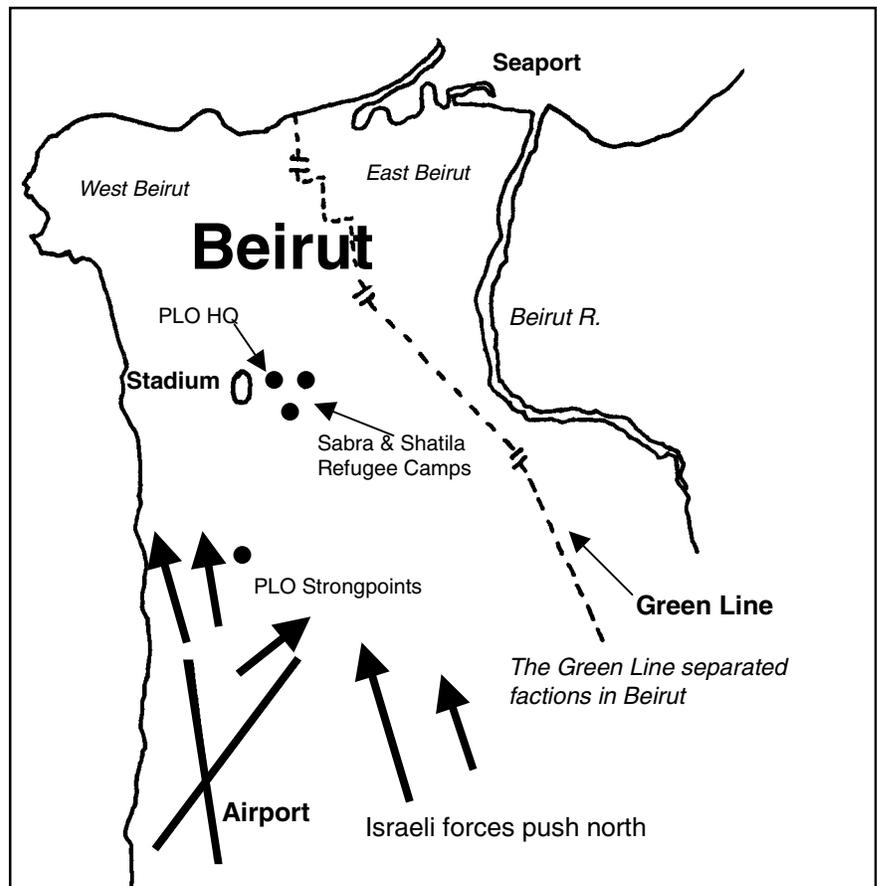
Though outfitted both technologically and doctrinally for high-intensity warfare in the open terrain of the Golan and the Sinai, the IDF was able to adapt to the MOU mission of the 1982 Lebanese campaign. Despite being a heavy force, the IDF proved that such a force could operate in an urban environment. Where other armies failed, the IDF did not, due to its flexibility, adaptability, training, and small unit leadership.

studded with modern skyscrapers. PLO forces in Beirut were the largest yet encountered, 10-15,000 plus 2-5,000 Syrian troops.<sup>12</sup> The IDF was faced with the daunting prospect of operating inside a large modern city against a well-armed, committed foe.

The IDF objective in Beirut was not a building-by-building fight to destroy the PLO. Instead, it was more limited: not the destruction but the withdrawal of the PLO from Lebanon. Therefore, the IDF limited the scope and duration of the ground fighting in Beirut. Firepower played a more prominent role here than earlier in the campaign. Beirut was too big to overwhelm with numbers. Actual ground fighting was limited strictly to PLO-held areas. These areas, like before, would be isolated and then thoroughly saturated by fire before any ground forces advanced. The destruction was greater than that inflicted earlier in the campaign, but the casualty-conscious IDF determined it could not afford to do otherwise.

IDF operations in Beirut lasted approximately three months. Fighting was mainly in the southern and western parts of the city. Early on, the IDF and Syrians fought for control of the main east-west route out of the city, the Beirut-Damascus highway. Once secure,

the IDF had the PLO in Beirut isolated and could bring all its pressure on them. Piecemeal, limited ground attacks, led by company-sized teams of infantry; tanks and self-propelled artillery pieces were used in these opera-



**Map 3**  
The Israeli advance on Beirut.



**The vulnerability of lightly armored APCs, like this M113, in the Lebanon invasion led the IDF to develop engineer vehicles adopted from obsolete tanks as troop carriers.**

The IDF experience in Lebanon's urban warrens raises vital questions for the U.S. Army. Some units in the IDF did better than others in MOUT. The difference lay in pre-invasion training. Those units that trained in some of the captured villages in the Golan and the Sinai were more prepared than those that did not. This training was conducted in small villages that were necessarily not representative of the large modern cities of Lebanon, but MOUT training can be conducted successfully in relatively modest training areas; large city-sized structures are not necessary. What matters most is for soldiers and leaders to learn the fundamentals of operating in and around structures.

Another important subject concerns the use of armor in urban areas. As stated, tanks could operate relatively safely in urban areas in conjunction with dismounted infantry. Thinner-skinned APCs were found vulnerable to AT fire and were withdrawn from fighting. To protect infantry on the move, the IDF began using armored engineer vehicles; this is a good example of IDF flexibility.<sup>14</sup> Other armies in similar circumstances have tried similar adaptations before.<sup>15</sup> Recent battles in Chechnya and Somalia amply demonstrate the danger thin-skinned vehicles face in the modern urban environment. The history of armored vehicles has shown a general trend of progressively greater and greater armor protection. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to posit whether there is any such thing anymore as "light" armored vehicles. Small, disorganized PLO AT teams savaged IDF APCs near Tyre, and Chechen rebels routinely destroy Russian armor formations. As the IDF has fought in Lebanon over the years, its infantry rides in a variety of "battle taxis" made from converted tanks.<sup>16</sup> Modern western armies, including the British, American, and German, have

spent large sums of money and effort to equip its armies with heavily armed but lightly armored IFVs (Infantry Fighting Vehicles). The IDF, with considerably more recent combat experience deems it more prudent to favor armor over speed or firepower. Those who plan the future of the mounted force should bear this in mind.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See CPT Robert L. Bateman, Review of "Fighting for the Future," *ARMOR*, September-October 1999, p. 60. CPT Bateman states the view that the oft-predicted dominance of MOUT has yet to come about.

<sup>2</sup>See Ralph Peters, *Fighting for the Future* in the chapter entitled, "Our Soldiers, Their Cities." Peters lays out a grim view of a future dominated by numbing, brutal urban warfare.

<sup>3</sup>From America's first war, the Revolution, to present-day contingencies in the Balkans, American operations have revolved around cities. Our wars may begin in the desert or the jungle but end in places like Hue and Kuwait City. For example, the memoirs of one of America's most distinguished WWII combat commanders, LTG James Gavin, were called "On to Berlin," not "On to the Central Plain."

<sup>4</sup>Recent operations have begun in cities and fighting continued in cities throughout the ops. Grenada began in Point Salinas airport, Panama in places like Rio Hato and Panama City. Peacekeeping operations like Haiti or Bosnia revolved around urban areas.

<sup>5</sup>The Palestinians, Lebanese, or Amnesty International might not agree that the Israelis were discriminate in their use of fires. The IDF was certainly more careful in their operations than the Syrians in their 1976 attack on Sidon or the destruction of the Syrian town of Hama, (See Thomas Freidman, "From Beirut to Jerusalem") where thousands were purposely killed. Certainly many civilians were killed during the IDF campaign in Lebanon. However, these casualties were the by-product, not the objective, of the campaign. The Serbs in Bosnia or the Russians in Chechnya or Sherman in Georgia targeted civilians specifically. The IDF went so far as to make maps listing every building in Beirut to aid in accuracy. That the IDF caused civilian casualties encapsulates the difficulty posed by MOUT for

an Army that uses ROEs: fighting means death and destruction and in MOUT, one is fighting in areas inhabited by non-combatants. The Syrians, Serbs, or Russians may not experience the moral and tactical difficulties that the IDF or U.S. Army might face in an urban fight.

<sup>6</sup>Each lasted for weeks, killed thousands on all sides and left the respective cities little more than rubble.

<sup>7</sup>M. Thomas Davis, "40 Km into Lebanon," (National Defense University Press, Washington DC: 1987) p. 78.

<sup>8</sup>"Operation Peace for Galilee," MOUT Homepage, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>R.D. McLaurin, "Technical Manual 13-89: Battle of Sidon," (Abbott Associates, Inc: 1989), p. 31.

<sup>10</sup>McLaurin, p. 31

<sup>11</sup>R.D. McLaurin and Paul A. Juredini, *Technical Manual 1-86: Battle of Beirut*, (U.S. Army Human Engineering Laboratory, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Aberdeen, Md.: 1986) pp. 13-14. Richard A. Gabriel, *Operation Peace for Galilee-The Israeli-PLO War in Lebanon*, (Hill and Wang, New York: 1984) pp. 47-59.

<sup>12</sup>McLaurin and Juredini, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup>"Operation Peace for Galilee," MOUT Homepage, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup>Carlo D'Este, "Decision in Normandy," (Harper Perennial, New York: 1983) p. 389. British Army LTG Richard O'Connor, Eighth Corps CG, experimented with mounting his infantry in armored self-propelled gun carriers when faced with a similar situation during the grim fighting in and around Caen during the Normandy campaign. The idea did not take hold, due mainly to a lack of desire by the artillery to transport infantry.

<sup>15</sup>LTC David Eshel, "Armored Anti-Guerilla Combat in South Lebanon" *ARMOR*, July-August 1997, pp. 26-28. The article shows that faced with the proliferation of AT systems, the IDF has increased the armor protection of its vehicles, especially older tanks and APCs.

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