Former IDF deputy chief Harel: We did not hit Hamas hard enough during Pillar of Defense

By YONAH JEREMY BOB

Former IDF deputy chief of staff Maj.-Gen. (res.) Dan Harel said Tuesday at the Herzliya Conference that he did not think the IDF had hit Hamas hard enough during Operation Pillar of Defense.

Harel’s remarks were made during a panel discussing Israel’s right to self-defense, and the strategic, moral and legal limits on that right.

Harel qualified his remarks slightly, saying no final conclusions could be made about the effectiveness of the IDF operation until more time had passed.

But he supported his statement, noting that already, only a couple of months after the November hostilities between Israel and Hamas, a Grad rocket was recently fired into Israel.

He contrasted it with Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, which he said had created a longer period of deterrence since Israel had acted against Hamas with far less restraint.

Overall, Harel noted that since 1982, Israel’s strategic self-defense doctrine had changed from fighting and defeating enemy states to dealing significant blows to non-state terror groups.

He said it was understood by Israel that there was no clear expectation of total victory or completely stopping attacks, so the emphasis was on sending a strong enough message that terror attacks would be put on the longest “time-out” possible.

Part of the panel’s debate involved how much restraint Israel should show in defending itself when fighting against (at least technically) non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah, when it is harder to pick black-and-white “enemy” targets to retaliate against or strike preemptively to deter them from attacking Israel.

Prof. Moshe Halbertal of the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya’s law school, for example, argued that many current strategies which advocate attacking a wide array of targets not directly related to terrorist groups, in order to get their host states or others to pressure the terrorist groups, are liable to backfire.

“I would be very careful with someone telling you this story” about how attacks on third parties will indirectly impact the behavior of non-state terrorist actors, said Halbertal.

He noted that the 1982 Lebanon invasion showed that playing such dynamic games invoked unintended consequences which, practically speaking, usually come back to haunt Israel more than any other party.

The moderator asked about the extent to which there is an understanding that Israel, with the high level of threats against it, is in a unique situation that should grant it broader rights to self-defense, including broader deterrence actions.

The question was premised on the idea that from the outset, many nations look critically at Israel’s claims regarding its IDF actions due to its over 40-year-long control of the West Bank.

Dr. Eliav Lieblich of the IDC Herzliya’s law school said that in many international forums such as the UN Human Rights Council, Israel’s continued hold over the West Bank makes it almost impossible to gain trust or sympathy for Israel’s claims to a right of broad self-defense.

On the other hand, Lieblich said that foreign militaries who deal with asymmetric enemies have far more sympathy for Israel’s strategic and legal dilemmas.

Former IDF Court of Appeals head Maj.-Gen. (res.) Yishai Beer, who is also a professor at IDC Herzliya’s law school, said that Israel had achieved slightly greater sympathy for its right to self-defense against non-state actors following the UN’s recognition of the US’s right to attack al-Qaida in its capacity as the non-state actor that perpetrated the September 11 terror attacks.