

Send in the bulldozers: what Israel told marines about urban battles

As troops close on Baghdad, Pentagon takes notes on house-to-house fighting in Jenin

Chris McGreal in Jerusalem
Wednesday April 2, 2003
The Guardian

Martin van Creveld's advice to the US marines on what lessons to draw from Israel's bloody urban battle in Jenin was precise: Forget the helicopters, invest in armoured bulldozers.

For months now, the Pentagon has been taking notes from the Israelis in preparation for what looks increasingly likely to be an arduous house by house, street by street, fight for Baghdad. Pentagon strategists have pored over videos of the Israeli military's assault on Jenin a year ago, when 150 lightly armed but determined Palestinians kept the army at bay for 11 days and killed 23 soldiers.

US officers watched Israeli tank raids into West Bank cities in February, and American soldiers have learned in the Israeli desert how to blow their way from house to house to avoid booby traps and street fighting. The Israeli insights build on years of exchanges of military technology and intelligence between the deeply intertwined armies. Among other things, the US is using Israeli-manufactured drones to scout across Iraqi lines.

But with the US army faced with fighting through Baghdad's sprawling maze of streets and alleyways, known intimately by its enemy, American technological superiority is probably worth less than the Israelis' bitter experience. And now there is the added factor of suicide bombers.

As the war with Iraq loomed, the US marines called in Mr Van Creveld, a military strategist at Jerusalem's Hebrew University with close ties to the Israeli army. At a briefing in North Carolina in September, he offered some lessons.

"There were three key things," he said. "How to clear streets house by house, particularly using bulldozers. They're very useful in this kind of war to break houses.

"How and when to use helicopters to take out snipers. And when not to, and I'd say Baghdad is one of those situations. And how to avoid civilian casualties."

Condemned

The Israeli army used giant armoured Caterpillar bulldozers and helicopter gunships to crush and rocket a square kilometre of Jenin, killing dozens of Palestinian fighters and civilians and destroying hundreds of homes. The American-made bulldozers - originally used in Vietnam - are in themselves weapons, bringing buildings crashing down on an enemy without having to engage him room by room. It was a widely condemned tactic in Jenin, which the Israelis claim saved civilian lives even though, like bombs, the killing is not selective.

But US forces have also been receiving insights into how to fight room by room if it becomes necessary. Close to 1,000 American soldiers were sent to Israel for joint manoeuvres at the beginning of the year. Some were sent to a mock Arab town in the Negev desert to draw on Israeli experience. Among other things, they were shown how Israeli soldiers avoid having to show themselves on the street by moving from inside one house to another by blowing a hole in the wall without bringing the building down.

In February, residents of Nablus reported seeing English-speaking troops in unfamiliar uniforms accompanying Israeli soldiers during a two-week incursion into the old city, where just such tactics were used. US army officers have observed Israeli units at first hand in Jenin and Bethlehem.

The traffic has been two way. Israeli officers have visited the US marines' thinktank at Quantico, Virginia. Its commander, Colonel Randy Gangle, confirms the visit took place but declines to discuss it other than to say he "appreciated the insights offered by the Israeli experience of the intifada".

Mr Van Creveld told the Americans that for all the lessons learned from the West Bank, the fight for Baghdad was likely to be a lot tougher. "The Americans and Brits are taking measures very similar to the ones we've been using for years in the [occupied] territories," he said. "But whatever resistance we faced in Jenin and Gaza is nothing compared to what the Americans can expect.

"The Palestinians are empty handed compared to the weaponry the Iraqis have. The Americans can expect heavier casualties. Baghdad will be really brutal."

Because the Iraqis are better armed, Mr Van Creveld warned the Americans that the Israeli experience of using helicopters to kill snipers was probably of little use to the US. That is almost certainly a lesson the Pentagon has already taken on board from its disastrous foray into Somalia.

The Israelis say they had another advantage the Americans will not.

"We have built a very robust intelligence structure which Americans don't have in Iraq," said retired Brigadier-General Shlomo Brom of the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv.

"On the other hand, I think the Palestinians are more motivated than the Iraqis." Israeli officials believe that Saddam Hussein has also learned some of the lessons of Jenin, particularly the use of booby traps and suicide bombers. After just one such bombing the Americans have swiftly adopted Israeli tactics at roadblocks - with tragic consequences for one vehicle full of women and children.

Gen Brom said possibly the best advice the Israelis had offered was to take it slowly until victory, and then get out fast. "An urban environment is the great equaliser," he said. "You can't utilise your superiority in training and equipment. It's very easy for your adversary to hide and he usually knows the terrain much better than you. There is the need to be cautious and understanding that it takes time. "But once it's over, the most important lesson is not to stay there any longer than is absolutely necessary. I see the similarity between the situation in Iraq and when we invaded Lebanon. Our mistake was to stay there much too long."