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The day before Yom Kippur is as good a time as any to pay a visit
to Unit 8200. It was 39 years ago today when this unit, which
serves as the backbone of the IDF's signal intelligence and code
decryption apparatus, failed in its mission. Since then, however,
it has amassed considerable strength. In recent years, the unit
has reached a watershed period in which it has had to adjust to
development in global technology, the changing face of warfare,
and, no less importantly, the tumult in the Middle East.

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8200 is a code name that conjures up many things to many people. Older observers will recall the intelligence officer stationed on an outpost on Mt. Hermon who fell captive to the Syrians and revealed the most sensitive military secrets known to the IDF. Younger Israelis will no doubt point to the dozens of successful high-tech start-up companies founded by former soldiers who served in the unit. And the combat troops will think back to the unit whose base of operations in Gilot was affectionately referred to as "515," a number that represents the unit's name in its previous incarnation as well as the time of day when its soldiers go home after a day of duty.

These anecdotes and cute tidbits do not even scratch the surface when it comes to taking stock of what 8200 has accomplished. A simple search on Google yields over 12.5 million results, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. If there has been one constant element surrounding 8200 all of these years, it has been the rigid secrecy that its soldiers have adhered to both during and after completion of their military service. There's also the grueling application and acceptance process, the draconian rules on use of information, the stringent limitations on private use of the unit's technology, and total avoidance of any contact with foreign agents or journalists. These principles represent the cornerstone of the unit's day-to-day operations, and they imbue it with an aura of mystery that has hung over it since its founding.

That is what makes Israel Hayom's exclusive sneak peek into the unit all the more remarkable and rare. To understand just how rare it is, one only needed to gauge the expression on the faces of 8200's support staff and field officers once they noticed a journalist and a photographer in their midst. From their vantage point, no one has yet to regret anything they didn't say, nor has anyone expressed sorrow for a picture they didn't take. As soldiers well-versed in the potency of intelligence-gathering, they repeatedly warned: "There's no doubt Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah will read this article, and not just him."

A Stuxnet Connection?

With a modicum of caution, it is safe to say that in recent years 8200 has accumulated a larger share of the IDF's operational pie. By extension, it has also benefited from more budgets and manpower. In years past, it was primarily tasked with gathering

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signals intelligence (SIGINT). In more recent years, however, its workload has taken on another dimension: cyberspace. According to foreign media reports, 8200 was involved in a joint Israeli-American project which was given the code name "Operation Olympic Games." This intelligence collaboration gave birth to Stuxnet, the computer virus that caused a shutdown of centrifuges in the Iranian nuclear facility in Natanz. Other media reports credited 8200 with creating other software whose main purpose was to either cause damage to, or gather information about, Iran, among other things.

Earlier this year, the world learned of Flame, a computer program which specialized in covert intelligence gathering. Kaspersky Lab, the Russian-based computer security firm which first discovered the existence of the virus, said that it was the most advanced attack software that it had ever seen. Analysts who monitored the digital signatures that were found with the software noticed that one of the pieces of data bore the date 2007, which indicates the year in which it was supposedly created. If so, it is difficult to imagine the technological strides that have been made by the software's author, who as far back as five years ago

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was able to invent a program that is still acknowledged as the most cutting-edge.

In the realm of cyber warfare, 8200 is not only responsible for intelligence gathering, but also for going on the offensive. Another IDF unit, which belongs to the army's teleprocessing branch, is charged with shoring up digital defenses. In recent years, the cyber front has expanded to the point where IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz has been urged to pump more resources into this field as part of the military's new multi-year budgeting plan. Gantz has so far approved just a portion of these requests, but he has promised the head of Military Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aviv Kokhavi, and the commander of Unit 8200 an immediate infusion of cash in the event of a technological solution or breakthrough.

Not Even the Sky's the Limit

Unit 8200, which was always the largest outfit in the IDF, has expanded even more in recent years. Tens of thousands of men and women serve under the command of Brig. Gen. N., who is the

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beneficiary of a special privilege extended to him by the army: the right to select whomever he wants of all the drafted enlistees into the IDF. The only other military unit that is permitted to choose its personnel beforehand is the IAF pilots' training course, though this too will likely change in the near future. This is due not just to the dramatic rise in importance of the technological sphere, but also to the increased use of unmanned aerial vehicles and the lessened need for human pilots. Soldiers in 8200 joke that they will soon be tasked with operating IAF fighter jets by remote control.

The main qualification needed for anyone wishing to serve in the unit is demonstrating a command of the exact sciences, including mathematics, physics, and, of course, computers. Anyone who enlists in the unit feels quite comfortable in these areas and is capable of understanding the language. An absolute majority of us are not quite there, as we will forever be relegated to the status of foreigner visiting the strange world of technology and computers.

But those who do inhabit this world, particularly the youngsters in their late teens, catapult Israel to a highly respectable place in the global rankings. "We just need to pick them, train them, and prevent them from engaging in too much monkey business," said a unit veteran. Once they're in, not even the sky is the limit. In a world in which Iran is the same distance away as Jerusalem and Windows software is available in Damascus just as it is in Tel Aviv, Israel is mostly reliant upon the capabilities of the men and women of 8200.

Israel has been a pioneer in the development of cyberspace technology. It is still reaping the fruits of its labor in this field. Although the unit did develop a great deal of technology of its own, it is still heavily reliant on software manufactured by computer giants Microsoft and Apple. While we tend to view each new technological development as manifested by the latest gadgetry, 8200 sees it as a springboard to places that were perceived as inaccessible and missions that were deemed impossible.

It is this tendency of breaking new ground and being first that has since its establishment set 8200 apart from its counterparts in the world of SIGINT. Many stories have been whispered down from generation to generation, and just a fraction of them, like the contents of the conversation between Egypt's Gamal Abd-al-Nasir and King Husayn of Jordan on the second day of the

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Six-Day War, have been made public.

Indeed, most of the information that has been gathered over the years remains classified, either under lock and key in IDF safes or ingrained in the minds of those in the know. The importance of these data remains critical to national security, to saving human life, and to understanding how developments and processes unfold. They also shed light on the limits of power and the importance of introspection in Israel and, in particular, the IDF, not just the ability to look outwards.

In recent years, 8200 has undergone a dramatic facelift. It has been transformed from a unit that mainly served at the whim of the country's leadership to a unit whose work benefits both the leadership and the troops operating in the field. This process was first initiated by Brig. Gen. (res.) Pinhas Buchris, who went on to become director-general of the Defense Ministry and also the chief executive officer of Oil Refineries Ltd.

As commander of 8200 during the 1990s, Buchris introduced the concept of utilizing information gathered by the unit for tactical needs. It was at this time that Israel was engaged in combat in Lebanon, where Hezbollah had posed a challenge to the IDF. Buchris was wise enough to understand that the unit, with its high-quality manpower, superb talents, and considerable resources, could not remain on the sidelines while the army's central campaign continued up north.

This process was greatly accelerated during the Second Intifada. During that time, the unit scored significant achievements -- the details of which remain hidden from public consumption -- in intercepting Palestinian terrorism. 8200 devoted resources to monitoring Palestinian terrorist activities in Judea and Samaria,

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helping IDF troops and Shin Bet field officers make thousands of arrests and confiscate explosives, thus saving many lives in Israel.

As part of their efforts, some of the unit's soldiers also began to head out into the field to hone their skills in doing basic tasks that were critical in the past but became nearly indispensable during the Palestinian terror campaign, like conducting operations on the ground instead of from distant bases.

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A byproduct of these efforts was the establishment of a combat battalion, the existence of which is being revealed here for the first time. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. V., is an engineer who served in 8200 as a conscript. "My wife complains that she married an 8200 man but instead ended up with a combat soldier," he said.

The deputy battalion commander is a combat soldier from the Paratrooper Brigade. There are also company and class commanders who in years past were chosen from those who served in elite units as well as those who fell short of completing pilots' training course. Last year, the army began to recruit commanders specifically for these positions within 8200.

By Air, Land and Sea

The first batch of soldiers who enlisted specifically for the 8200 combat unit completed its training just last week. It took 11 months, the first four of which were spent in grueling basic training. Then came an additional month of training at the unit's headquarters in Gilot, which was then followed by six months of professional instruction designed to immerse them in the world of SIGINT.

Afterward, they will be embedded with other combat units with whom they will tag along on missions. They are tasked with two key priorities: utilizing intelligence and technology methods to quickly and efficiently thwart enemy plans; and tactical intelligence gathering in the field. In the field exercise which we witnessed, the troops were tasked with breaking into safes and computers to obtain key information that would later be analyzed by other intelligence agencies.

On routine days (if there is such a thing in the Middle East), the battalion is stationed in 8200's base in Gilot. But the soldiers' daily routine is a far cry from the usual 9-to-5 experience that characterizes others' service at the base. For these combat troops, it is a closed base. They rarely are granted leaves to go home, and they are constantly placed on call. It is rare for more than a day to go by when they are not summoned to undertake a mission, usually in small groups of two, three soldiers at a time. From the moment they are called into action, they must follow the procedures that apply to all combat troops. It is a process that entails hooking up with commanders in the field (usually the brigade commanders) and the Shin Bet

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personnel. Eventually, the soldiers are integrated into other combat units in the field, usually either elite commando outfits or infantry troops.

Some of 8200's combat troops speak Arabic, and some do not. All of them are trained in utilizing technological tools and solving problems that are liable to come up during the operation. On numerous occasions, they find themselves under enemy fire. "In the last year, the battalion performed over 300 missions," said Lt. Col. V. "In an absolute majority of these instances, these were operations that presented problems that could not be solved solely by technological means, so we were required to go out into the field and find a solution."

In other words, the battalion combat troops incorporate the skills they acquired from the "mother unit" of 8200 and apply them to the field, where the terrain is much harder to cover. The close contact between the battalion troops and the regular fighting units enables the combined force to come up with pinpoint solutions while rapidly exhausting all intelligence and technological means.

Most of the unit's anti-terror successes took place in Judea and Samaria, but it has also distinguished itself in the air and at sea as well as on other fronts. "During Operation Cast Lead, we managed to come across some concrete intelligence in the field that ended up saving a number of soldiers' lives," said Lt. Col. Y., who heads the 8200 staff headquarters. "There was one instance in which we found out that there were houses which were booby-trapped with bombs and mines, and as a result operational plans were altered and soldiers were instructed not to enter areas that were certain death traps. This is a perfect example of information that we would not have obtained unless we were there on the ground, and that is why the battalion is so unique."

8200 Wants You for Combat

"There is a large number of outstanding young people who think about joining 8200, but they eventually prefer to enlist in combat units," said Lt. Col. Y. "The battalion here allows them to get the best of both worlds -- they can be in combat, and they can also be part of the unit." "His mother can tell her friends that he's in 8200, and his father can tell people that he's a combat soldier," said Lt. Col. V.

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While talking to the young combat soldiers who had just completed their basic training and instruction regimens, it was clear that the combination of cutting-edge technology and being deployed in the field as part of a fighting force was the main thing that attracted them to the battalion. "After I completed high school, I was undecided between intelligence and combat," said Tirosh, an enlistee from Rosh Haayin. "When they came to me and offered me a spot in the unit, I sought out people who served there before so that they could tell me exactly what it is that they do there, since everything is so hush-hush here. I decided to give it a go, and I got exactly what I wanted."

Still, when it comes to the perception among combat troops in general, 8200 is fighting an uphill battle. Unlike the technological sphere, where a high school student who excelled in the sciences is exclusively claimed by the unit for service, the battalion must vie for prospective soldiers who also have the option of joining other combat outfits, many of which offer a sexier, more attractive Q rating. To bridge this image gap, 8200 decided to reveal the existence of the battalion in this article. "We want to reach new people, young people who do not know that 8200 is not just a unit that sits under neon lights from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. but that it is a place that also offers a lot of challenging, combat-related things," said Lt. Col. A. "Our advantage is that we offer a fusion of combat and technology. The potency of the battalion is in its reliance on the potency of the unit and its capabilities."

The appeal to the youth is designed primarily to highlight 8200's combat battalion, which the unit hopes will make it more attractive to prospective enlistees. The battalion commander believes that the battle for hearts and minds is no different than the battle in the field, hence the unit must take the initiative if it hopes to reach its goals. The unit hopes to draft two classes of troops to fill up its battalion every year so that in a few years' time it will become a major player in appealing to soldiers, much like the larger infantry battalions.

Appealing to the Masses

Officers in 8200 believe that the next war will dull the wounds and residual bitterness of the Second Lebanon War. The unit entered that conflict in 2006 ready to go, but its contribution was near worthless. In the 35 days of combat, it invested great

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effort along the entire northern front, but its contribution was virtually irrelevant. Perhaps its influence was mostly felt on the strategic level, with 8200 analysts correctly predicting that Syria would not join in the fighting. It did not, however, provide the IDF with particularly valuable intelligence that could've tilted the balance in Israel's favor on the battlefield against Hezbollah and its leadership in Beirut. It also failed to come up with any data that could benefit the soldiers fighting in the alleyways of Bint Jubayl and Ayta al-Shab. There was a sense that this unit, the vaunted 8200, was simply unable to deliver the goods that would make the difference in the war.

The results of the war and the feeling of general irrelevance in determining the outcome prompted 8200 to undergo an intense process of introspection, all in the hope of making the necessary corrections and being prepared for the next war. To that end, the unit underwent numerous structural changes, just like all other units in Military Intelligence. After the war, MI formed an operational brigade whose main responsibility is to direct the intelligence-gathering activities for military needs on the ground and to make that intelligence accessible to the forces in the field.

Meanwhile, 8200 was moving closer to the field and appealing to the masses. It would no longer be the elitist outfit from Glilot. Instead, its soldiers and officers have been present at every large-scale drill and operation. The goal is to deepen the understanding that without collaboration within the army, it will be impossible to win the next war. The combat battalion, which will be embedded with various forces, is a key element in this wider philosophy, which IDF commanders call "operative integration" of intelligence-combat maneuvers in real time.

From the vantage point of 8200, which is also known officially as "the central intelligence-gathering unit," this is a dramatic change. Its main task will be to provide early warning before the outbreak of war. This entails audio surveillance and monitoring of strategic sources, deciphering enemy plans, and providing their superiors with the information that will enable them to either prevent war or deal a pre-emptive blow. In the old days, this was considered 80 percent of the work. Nowadays, the situation is different.

Monitoring Social Media

In its annual intelligence assessment, which was officially

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presented to the government three weeks ago, MI determined that the probability that an Arab country would launch a war against Israel was very low. On the other hand, there was a dramatically higher chance that war would break out as a result of unforeseen events, like border incidents, large-scale terror attacks, or the delivery of strategic weaponry to irresponsible hands.

Intelligence-gathering also underwent a wholesale change. In the old days, there was only a need to decipher the intentions of a
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few leaders. Nowadays, there are a great number of organizations and groups with conflicting interests and goals. The tumult of the Arab Spring compelled 8200 to also begin monitoring social media outlets, like Facebook and Twitter. The aim is to spot any signs of oncoming change. The social media activities of opposition groups and terrorist organizations, which were of no consequence in the past, are now subject to surveillance.

One flashpoint is the Sinai Peninsula. Two years ago, Israel paid scant attention to what was taking place there because of the relative calm on the border, a direct result of the peace treaty with Cairo. The fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the proliferation of terrorism in Gaza, the infiltration of jihadist elements in Sinai, and the flow of refugees from Africa have forced Israel to mount a concentrated intelligence campaign, with 8200 playing a significant role in this cause.

The unit is being asked to devote resources and means to this new front. In years past, these tasks could be delegated to analysts who had a particular expertise in matters related to Gaza, Egypt, and global terrorism. Nowadays, there needs to be an integrated, combined effort to thwart the triple threat of terrorist attacks, migrant infiltration, and missile and rocket fire over the border fence.

The combat battalion is just one small part of an overall campaign to treat a regional headache that is growing more menacing. The unit has made peace with the fact that the old paradigm of early warning amounting to 80(-PERCENT-) of the military effort is no longer relevant. Today, it hopes to be more relevant and active during both wartime and calm. Those in the know say that the results will be overtly evident in war, but those that are classified will likely remain that way forever.

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