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Shamir, Eitan

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

13. Israel's Future Wars: Universal Lessons of a Peculiar Case[1]

Eitan Shamir

Introduction

The following paper examines Israel's views toward future armed conflicts. It discusses four main themes: Israel's traditional security doctrine since the days of its establishment; the emergence of new threats over the last decade and their future significance; Israel's evolving response; and the question of what, if any, relevance this has for the United States. The main argument of this paper is that, while one could conceive Israel's situation as a window to the future and benefit from studying various aspects of its force structure and employment, one should also be very cautious in making comparisons to Israel's unique situation and responses.

Israel's traditional security doctrine

Israel's original security doctrine was shaped by its geostrategic position and a host of constraining factors, such as demographics. David Ben Gurion, the architect of Israel's security doctrine was mindful of the need to tailor a "unique response to a unique situation." Ben Gurion's analysis led him to form the following basic assumptions:

- Arab hostility toward the State of Israel will likely continue for decades

- Israel suffers from chronic inferiority in both territory and demographics

This basic asymmetry in resources, combined with Arab hostility, led him to conclude both that Israel cannot afford to maintain a huge army and that only a series of decisive defeats on the battlefield might convince Arab regimes to accommodate the notion of Israel's permanence.

The major threat during Ben Gurion's years as prime minister (1955-63) was a potential invasion of Israel by strong conventional forces of one or more Arab armies effectively occupying and cutting off major centers and, thus, ending the life of the young Jewish state. In addition, these early years of the state of Israel saw the rise of terror attacks against settlements along Israel's borders disrupting normal life.

Under Ben Gurion's leadership, Israel's security tenets were shaped by the following principles:

- Exhibiting conventional superiority and self-reliance on the battlefield in order to achieve a quick decision by quickly transferring the war into enemy territory, annihilating its main forces, and threatening its capital. In the absence of a big standing army, most units would be comprised of reservists.

- Develop and maintain a special relationship with a superpower (initially France, later the United States) for the sake of diplomatic and material support.

- Obtain technological superiority grounded in top-flight academic and research institutions in order to nurture a thriving industry. The concept of nuclear ambiguity appeared later.

- Possess moral and ideological certainty that Israel's struggle is inherently just, which is critical for mobilizing society to endure a long struggle.

Ben Gurion believed that sustaining the above qualities would generate superior battlefield performance and secure Israel's existence.

These security tenets were then translated into three organizing operational concepts: *deterrence, early warning,* and *decision.* Deterrence was not understood as absolute deterrence, but rather as *accumulative deterrence.* It is different from the concept employed by the two superpowers during the Cold War. Israeli deterrence meant postponing each round of violent conflict as much as possible, but realizing that, since conflict is unavoidable, deterrence is inherently destined to fail at one point or another. When this happens, *early warning* capabilities will enable a quick mobilization of Israel's reserve units, which comprise the bulk of its ground forces. This process operates with minimal interference due to the Israel Air Force' air superiority. Reserve forces that have been quickly assembled into brigades and divisions will then reinforce standing army units that have been both blocking an enemy advance on the border and maneuvering inside enemy territory for the sake of neutralizing its main forces. Operationally, this is achieved by employing a classic maneuver that aims to envelope or encircle the primary forces of the enemy. A quick and *decisive* outcome is critical also due to the deployment of reserves that are needed desperately to perform their regular civil functions.

This approach was also characterized in US Army doctrine as a "maneuver approach," one that seeks to neutralize or strike critical enemy targets and thus paralyze an opponent's entire system. It emphasizes speed and the independence of commanders who are able to exploit fleeting opportunities on the battlefield, virtues, which the Israel Defense Force (IDF) perceives that it possesses as an advantage over its adversaries.[2]

According to this doctrine, the outcome of every round of violence should leave no room for interpretation. The victorious should be undisputed and the price paid by the vanquished in prestige and material should be sufficiently heavy that they lose their appetite for another round in the foreseeable future. Ben Gurion hoped that, after a few rounds with exclusively negative outcomes for Israel's adversaries, the Arabs would understand that they had reached a strategic impasse and thus desist. This is the thought that underlies *accumulative deterrence*—gathering more deterrence with each additional round of fighting.

Israel's security doctrine served the country well during the first four decades of its existence. However, there were also some interesting deviations. For example, in both 1956 and 1967, Israel initiated preemptive strikes when it felt threatened, demonstrating that the interpretation of *early warning* in its doctrine was an elaborate one. In 1956, Israel went to war only after it secured the direct military cooperation of two European powers, Great Britain and France. In 1960, its early warning system failed when the Egyptian army was deployed in the Sinai during what is known as the Rotem Affair. Later, in 1973, the early warning system failed again, this time when enemy intentions were misinterpreted. Although enemy troop mobilization offered a clear signal, the Israeli government refused to order a preemptive strike out of fear for the political consequences and Israel came under a surprise attack. But, other components of its security doctrine worked magnificently well and enabled Israel to turn the tables in this conflict. These included American political assistance and shipments of military hardware, quick mobilization of reserve units, and the ability of IDF commanders to seize the initiative after the initial surprise and transfer the battle to enemy territory.

Paradoxically, Israel's early warning failed after territorial expansion, which followed the Six Day War in 1967. On the eve of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the option of a preemptive strike was considered by the government, but rejected by then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan due to the heavy diplomatic costs involved. The enhanced territorial buffer gave Israel a sense of security and allowed risk-taking that it otherwise would have avoided prior to the Six Day War.

It can be argued that Israel's security doctrine, including the idea of accumulative deterrence, has been successful. Egypt, Israel's main and most dangerous rival, signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, followed by Jordan in 1994. Syria has upheld the 1974 ceasefire agreements on Golan Heights in spite of serious tests, such as the 1982 and 2006 Lebanon Wars and other more recent operations reported in the media. However, the transformation of the strategic landscape during the 1990s and 2000s has witnessed the rise of new types of adversaries, posing various new and additional threats.

Israel's evolving threats

In the past, primary threats to Israel's security would be divided into two main groups: threats posed by conventional militaries from bordering states to Israel's territorial integrity and threats posed by non-state terrorist organizations, chiefly involving disruption of daily life. However, since the 1990s, Israel has seen the emergence of new types of threats, which have taken a more dominant role. That said, Israel cannot completely exclude the risk of traditional threats—witness recent events in the Arab world, such as the so-called Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt. The landscape requires the incorporation of new threats into Israel's pre-existing security doctrine in such a way as to provide a response to both old and new types of threats.

What are these new types of threats? One categorization compartmentalizes them according to geography: Israel and the Palestinian territories under its control, Israel's immediate neighbors, and its outer circle.

Israel and the Territories

Should the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations fail or continue to languish, a disappointed Palestinian population could mount a popular uprising similar to the 'slingshot and stone' intifada of 1989-93. This scenario was already much discussed before the September 11, 2011, terrorist attacks in the United States and the unilateral Palestinian drive toward statehood at the UN. Palestinian terrorist organizations might also emerge and launch a suicide bombing campaign similar to the one of the 2001-03 second intifada.

Israel's immediate neighbors

As mentioned above, the probability of a conventional attack by an immediate neighbor has been reduced dramatically during the last two decades, but should not be excluded completely. This assessment could change once the dust finally settles on the Arab-Spring movement that has engulfed Arab states, such as Syria and Egypt, and will determine the fate of these countries.

An additional evolving threat that Israel has experienced is the rise of strong non-state actors, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. As masters of a territory and population, these actors combine religious

ideology, a political agenda, and armed struggle. They rely on the support of both local populations and foreign powers, such as Iran and Syria, existing almost as states within states, thus enjoying the advantages of statehood while not being held accountable for their actions as states are.

Hezbollah has evolved as a prototypical champion of what some characterize as "hybrid warfare," incorporating a mixture of tactics seen in guerrilla warfare, urban terror, and conventional combat with the objective of neutralizing Israel's operational and technological advantage. This construct has been described in a study published by the IDF's Dado Center as the "Other RMA" (Revolution in Military Affairs).[3] Conceptually, it encompasses three main principles—*deterrence, survivability,* and *attrition*—with large quantities of cheap and easy-to-maintain concealed projectiles poised against Israeli population centers. These projectiles are camouflaged and defended from an Israeli ground incursion in tough-to-maneuver terrain and protected against Israel's sophisticated defense systems that include well-trained light infantry equipped with mortars, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), and advanced Command and Control (C2) systems.

This hybrid-warfare system with its offensive and defensive capabilities achieves *deterrence* by holding Israeli civilians hostage and raising the cost of mounting an operation within the enemy territory. S*urvivability* is achieved through redundancy, concealment, and invisibility as IDF forces incur casualties while attempting to crack the defenses safeguarding the rockets that fire on Israel's population. In this manner, *attrition* is then achieved and the terrorist groups can proclaim a ceasefire as having resisted surrender, unlike the large Arab armies in the past. In such as conflict, the terrorists survive and keep firing their missiles until the end, inflicting terror and casualties on Israel.

The conflicts in Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2008) exposed some of the strengths and weaknesses inherent to this condition. Both Hezbollah and Hamas were able to fire rockets into Israel until the last day of hostilities. Both suffered enormously, but survived.[4] Both succeeded in manipulating the narrative of the conflict—in the media and public eye—to their own benefit. The lesson they learned seems clear: keep it up in both quantity and quality. Their goal is now to increase missile payloads and accuracy to the point where they cannot only terrorize Israeli civilian centers, but also hit strategic civilian infrastructures and military installations, thereby disrupting the IDF as it mobilizes its reserves and tries to function effectively.

An interesting phenomenon of recent years has been the doctrinal convergence between organizations such as Hezbollah and states like Syria. Impressed by the success of the Hezbollah model and aware of its own limitations, the Syrian armed forces have increasingly adopted the Hezbollah model. The Syrian state, however, possesses a much larger and much more accurate missile arsenal capable of accurately striking on critical assets in Israel. At the same time, Syria *is* also a state and thus does not enjoy the same immunity as Hezbollah.

Israel's Outer Circle

During the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq fired 39 Scud missiles at Israel, marking a new era in Israel security. Previously Iraq and other countries lacking a mutual border with Israel had dispatched ground forces as reinforcements to help their Arab neighbors fight Israel. Such was the case in both 1948 and 1973. The introduction of ballistic missiles later provided the means to hit Israel from afar. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the neutralization of its strategic capabilities, Iran has taken the lead in developing long-range ballistic missile capabilities. Syria also possesses a large arsenal of these

missiles. It would take 60 seconds for a Syrian Scud and 10 minutes for the same missile launched from Iran to strike Tel Aviv.

New missile capabilities by those in Israel's Outer Circle are now being coupled with an increased WMD potential and enhanced nuclear program. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was suspected of pursuing this course and thus was invaded by a US-led coalition. At present Iran remains undeterred, continuing its own nuclear program.

The Rival System: Creating synergy

Another way to view these emerging threats is to conceptualize the various hostile entities as one system with different components that reinforce each other and create a *synergetic* effect. Hezbollah and Hamas are proxies of Iran and Syria; all these actors are dependent on each other, playing different roles and utilizing their relative advantage. Hezbollah and Hamas are well trained and benefit from access to state-of-the-art weapons, deep bunkers, ATGMs, and C2 systems precisely because they are supported, equipped, and trained by states. Without state support, these organizations would not pose the same threat level to Israel. It is the merger between states and non-state organizations that generates such a wide spectrum of threats: WMD, standoff fire, suicide bombings, international terror, guerilla insurgencies, and conventional warfare.

Israel's doctrinal response

Israeli defense planners have taken note of this changing landscape and have been working to update Israel's defense thinking over the past decade. Some of Israel's defense tenets will remain the same, others will be reinforced, and others are destined for change.

In Israel, unlike in Europe or even the US, the defense budget is likely to grow over the next few years. Fortunately, the Israeli economy has remained robust and has experienced steady growth, despite the current global economic turmoil that began in 2008, thus allowing a budget increase without applying unbearable strain to the economy.

Israel will continue to rely on the US as its major ally, with increase dependence on collaboration in the field of military technology (e.g., future JSF F-35 procurements) and the need for critical US support in the international arena. Moreover, in contending with an adversary as large and distant as Iran, Israel continues to invest in long-range capabilities, such as submarines, space technologies, the Joint Strike Fighter, and enhanced Special Forces capabilities. Despite these enhanced capabilities, Israel understands it still requires the assistance of a super power in some areas. For example, US radar systems deployed in Israel are designed to detect incoming ballistic missiles from a distance of 2,000 km and allow Israel's missile defense systems additional critical response time.

Israel will continue to depend upon its *technological edge* to develop new technological solutions for at least some of its main security challenges. This was demonstrated after the 2006 war, when Israel built both the Trophy system to counter ATGMs and Iron Dome to intercept short-range rockets. Both systems have already proven themselves operationally.

In terms of force, design *versatility* is key. Facing a large spectrum of threats, Israeli force planners prefer those means which can operate in numerous different scenarios and be optimized, even if not ideally, in both counterterrorism and conventional battlefield situations. For example, the IDF only

employs main battle tanks (MBT) that are most suited to conventional engagements, but also employs these tanks in counterterrorism and guerrilla warfare scenarios.

Changes and modifications have been made in the *deterrence–early warning–decision* concept. *Deterrence* has become a key tenet. In some scenarios, it is unclear whether a decisive victory can be achieved; when fighting against hybrid organizations, the goal is to hit them hard and as quickly as possible. At the same time, the Israeli home front will be exposed to a barrage of missiles and rockets, giving rise to another key concept: *defense*.

The doctrine speaks of two types of defense: active and passive. Active defense includes multiple layers of anti-missile defense systems, like the Arrow (against long-range missiles), David's Sling (mid-range), and Iron Dome (short-range rockets and missiles). However, these are expensive and can provide protection to only critical installations, ensuring that the state and the military can continue functioning. In parallel, the doctrine calls for investments in passive defense, building installations to protect the population but also educating them how to behave in such scenarios. This requires enhanced cooperation between Israel's various organizations and agencies, including local municipalities, police, and ministries responsible for and during crisis situations.

Israel also invests heavily in its conventional forces. The Merkava 4 and the Namer, a heavily protected armored personnel carrier based on the Merkava chassis, are both equipped with the Trophy system and are designed to enable the IDF to conduct combined arms operations—fire and maneuver—in order to penetrate even the most fortified lines as on the Syrian front. No less important, the IDF is conducting additional training and maintaining high force readiness. The IDF is still comprised of conscripts and reserves with a professional officer corps, but, due to growing technological and professional requirements, an increased number of positions are filled by career soldiers.

What are the relevant take-aways?

Of the four scenarios presented in the workshop materials, the only one capable of genuinely enhancing Israel's security by reducing the spectrum of threats is the *concert of powers*. The major source of instability in the region is Iran. If the leading world power were to contain the Iranian regime through effective sanctions and a credible military threat, the current radical regime could collapse, possibly destabilizing all radical elements in the region. This, in turn, might facilitate the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and pave the way for a possible Israeli-Palestinian agreement. The other three scenarios offer no real potential for increased pressure on the Iranian regime. As such, one can surmise that the security trends described above are likely to continue.

Strategically, Israel's prevailing security doctrine is designed for deterrence. Israel may be the only country in the world, with the possible exception of South Korea, facing an imminent threat on its borders from strong militaries and a parallel missile threat to its main population centers. In contrast, at least for now, the US is focused on nation-building abroad and, thus, mobilizing forces and engaging in activities that are mostly counterinsurgency and population-centric in nature. For the IDF, civilians in battlefield areas are essentially a "nuisance," interfering with pursuit of the enemy. In contrast, for US forces, winning the hearts and minds of the people is the current mission. These conflicting goals engender a host of other differences in force composition, tactics, and operations.

Yet, there are a number of similarities as well. Both militaries fight regularly in urban areas where the enemy hides among the civilian population. Both lock horns with various radical Islamist groups that advocate deep hatred for the West and its belief system. Some tactical challenges are common to Israel and the US as well, including threats posed by improvised explosive devices, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, other small arms, and suicide bombers.

Notwithstanding, in 2006, and to a lesser degree in 2008, the IDF confronted a much more sophisticated opponent than that which the US has faced in both Afghanistan and Iraq.[5] Given this state of affairs the IDF resolved to restore and improve its conventional combined arms fighting abilities, having concluded that its infantry and armored units require greater firepower and protection for the task of maintaining mobility on the battlefield. If Iran now equips US adversaries with some of the same capabilities as Hezbollah, or if in the near future the US military is tasked to conduct deterrent/punitive expeditions that involve ground forces rather than the current focus on counterinsurgency and nation-building, it is advisable to carefully study the lessons learned by Israel in 2006 and 2008 and adjust accordingly.

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1 I wish to thank Shalom Lipner for his comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 See the chapter on the IDF tradition of command in Eitan Shamir, "Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, UK and Israeli Armies," (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011).

3 The Study can be found in: BG Itai Brun, 'While You Were Busy Making Other Plans: "The Other RMA," Journal of Strategic Studies, 33:4, 2010, 535-565.

4 See: Martin van Creveld, "The Second Lebanon War: A Re-assessment," *Infinity Journal* 3 (Summer 2011), 4–7.

5 See the paper by David Johnson (RAND) on Israel's war against Hezbollah and Hamas.