

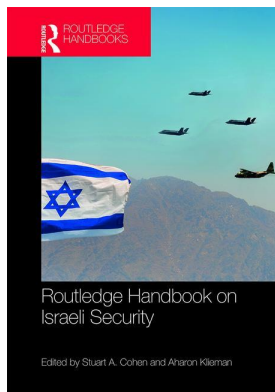
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THE EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDF

Yaakov Amidror

Introduction

Self-reliance has always been at the core of Israel's security doctrine. Following upon the horrors of the Holocaust, Israel's founding fathers instinctively grasped the imperative for preserving independence of decision and action. Thus, echoing sentiments they first expressed 70 years ago, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said on May 23, 2017, "We remember the hatred towards Jews that consumed a defenseless people. We pledge never to be defenseless against that hatred again. And to fulfill that pledge, Israel must always be able to defend itself by itself against any threat."

Despite the financial and social costs – Israel still spends around 5% of its GNP on defense – this premise remains the cornerstone of Israel's national security philosophy and of IDF (Israel Defense Forces) operational planning. Absent self-sufficiency in major categories of defense capability, Israel has had no alternative but to accept military aid from other countries, mainly funding and advanced weapon systems. Even so, the original foundational principle still holds: the Jewish state must be ready to pursue its own national security without the involvement of outside parties on the battlefield.

This chapter reviews patterns of continuity and change throughout the IDF's development over the course of seven decades. Its central thesis is that adjustments by the IDF in terms of (1) military ethos, (2) organizational structure (3) command and control reflect a dominant *evolutionary* rather than *revolutionary* pattern. Thus, most of the initial principles guiding the IDF at the time of its formation remain valid today – albeit with essential amendments dictated primarily by the unstable Middle East strategic environment. Today, Israel is immeasurably stronger than in the past; for the time being conventional threats to the country's existence have diminished, while the ranking of its enemies and the nature of threats to its national security are qualitatively different.

The point to keep in mind is that the military establishment and the modern IDF still adhere to many of the guidelines and standard operating procedures formulated as early as the 1950s, soon after the end of War of Independence, and credited with relative success ever since.

Three factors certify the IDF's uniqueness as a military organization:

- It confronts a relentlessly hostile environment;
- Between rounds of conflict it is called upon to carry out operations of unprecedented complexity;
- It must be prepared at all times for a range of future contingencies covering both full-scale and limited wars.

Defining characteristics

Force composition

Worth noting at the start is that Israel continues to maintain a system of mandatory conscription at ages 18–21, meaning a majority of its men and women in uniform are both young conscripts and inexperienced. Secondly, since the IDF constantly engages in developing fresh recruits as well as career officers, fully a third of the complement will be engaged in various training programs at any given moment. Those displaying “good soldiering” then advance fairly rapidly through the ranks. It is only after several years of intensely active service as field commanders that they are given time out to receive theoretical military education and rudimentary exposure to military history.

The IDF is thus both a well-oiled war machine run on a permanent war footing, programmed for the renewal of conflict at a moment’s notice, and a never-ending prep school, socializing and transforming thousands of young men and women every year from civilians to soldiers. From both a socio-economic and military perspective, this latter effort represents a serious drain on resources and on energies otherwise better channeled to war preparedness.

The operational arena

Due to the country’s small size and to the fact that the several regional commands are closely interlinked, the IDF functions as a single armed force fighting in a single theater of action even while engaging several enemies simultaneously. Unhindered movement throughout the interior of the country thus becomes critical for the IDF’s wartime capabilities, making it possible to transfer units and supplies from one sector to another rapidly.

Another operational premise is that the outcome of any conflict is likely be decided on the ground. This in no way contradicts the very high importance IDF strategists attach to employing Israel’s powerful and modern air force to the greatest extent possible, contingent in each situation upon the targeted area, geographic terrain and enemy in question.

A further defining feature is the blurred if not altogether erased distinction between Israel’s military and civilian home fronts. In light of the massive and all-encompassing firepower now aimed at the country – in particular, the more than 120,000 missiles and rockets now deployed by organizations such as *Hizbullah* and *Hamas* – defending the home front acquires singular importance. For this purpose, the IDF increasingly relies on state-of-the-art military technologies.

Operational challenges

A primary challenge now facing the IDF ever since the establishment of *Hizbullah* 30 years ago is developing the ability (a) to fight terrorist organizations that are assuming the status of full-fledged armies and are acting from within populated areas, and (b) to destroy the growing arsenal of missiles they possess. This dual challenge mandates the IDF continue to invest in unique defense systems, while also maintaining its offensive stance and the ability to carry out missions in difficult terrain, such as mountainous areas with thick vegetation, and urban areas with extensive underground tunnel networks. While accustomed to applying most of its force from within Israel to well-defined adjacent areas immediately beyond its borders, the IDF must also gear itself in coming years to act against high-quality targets at unprecedented, far greater distances.

In the foreseeable future the IDF’s battles are expected to take place in densely populated regions, making it difficult in the extreme to distinguish between civilians and enemy

combatants. Both *Hizbullah* and *Hamas* have purposefully worked to promote precisely such a situation in order to limit the IDF's freedom of operation and to drag it into conflict with the international community. World opinion, for its part, has remained silent even as these terrorist organizations persist in firing on Israel's civilian population from within the very midst of Lebanese or Palestinian residential centers. Clearly, this new predicament directly affects the IDF's *modus operandi*: its methods of combatting the enemy plus the need to secure domestic and international legitimacy for the army's actions. These become serious preliminary considerations at all levels of decision-making when assessing any given or hypothetical security situation.

The technological dimension

A top priority of late are cyber warfare and autonomous systems, with the IDF the first military to deploy UAVs for intelligence and attack purposes. Israel is presently capable of manufacturing tanks and heavy armor indigenously as well as its own active anti-missile defense systems. It is also in the process of producing much of its own artillery, whereas submarines are constructed and outfitted under contract in Germany, as are surface naval vessels. Israel's air force, on the other hand, bases its armory on American mainframe platforms, which Israel's military industries then proceed to upgrade with advanced electronics systems.

To optimize the use of precision-guided ordinance now in the IDF's possession requires a major shift in the focus of military intelligence toward first identifying and then actually targeting enemy operatives and assets. This combination of weapons technology offering high degrees of accuracy with the ability to zero in on targets highlights the IDF's ability to inflict precise and meaningful damage from great distances. Such a welcome and timely capability meets three requirements: target identification in real time; striking as many targets as possible simultaneously in support of ground forces while also neutralizing the missile threat to Israel; and minimizing Arab civilian casualties and collateral damage, thereby retaining international legitimacy.

To operate in such complicated environments and to coordinate such sophisticated weapon systems, the IDF has installed new command and control systems. Their main purpose is to weld the different elements into one very smart network, thereby ensuring that all information arrives at the correct place, at the correct time and at the necessary command posts. The system is designed to minimize the errors that the growing complexity of the new battleground might cause the combat forces to make.

Adaptability and innovativeness when confronting inevitable change, as seen here, is an IDF hallmark. Although several committees of inquiry since the 1973 Yom Kippur War have found the army unprepared and forced the retirement of senior officers, the IDF retains its public image of effectiveness. It has proven its ability to overcome occasional operational mishaps and to correct mistakes, inspiring confidence that it remains equal to the challenges it faces.

What this essay chooses to emphasize, however, is the powerful hold of two permanent variables still playing a role in shaping the structure and character of the IDF: the immediate pre-state and post-statehood experience, and immutable geography.

Roots of the IDF

Worth recalling is how the IDF grew out of a grand merger, which integrated four separate paramilitary organizations. The *Haganah* and *Palmach*, which together had formed the semi-clandestine military wing of the Jewish Agency (the Jewish formal representative organization) during the British mandate period; and the *Irgun* and *Lehi*, two (much smaller) forces that had led the armed struggle against the British. There is considerable significance in these roots in

terms of personnel, because all four groups attracted the most talented and highly motivated young men and women of the Jewish *Yishuv* (pre-state Jewish community). The caliber of its officers made the fledgling IDF a key institution in the newly founded state, while also enabling the armed forces to maintain high leadership and operational standards.

The IDF culture that emerged, valuing improvisational skill over learning from history and boldness over rules and regulations, has its deeper roots in the pre-state militias. Besides providing much of the organizational DNA, the informal character of the *Palmach*, and to a lesser extent the *Haganah*, enormously influenced the spirit of the IDF. Even today, the ground forces in particular preserve the somewhat disorderly tradition of placing less emphasis on strict discipline. It would seem that the absence at times of professionalism, together with a lack of respect for the historical and theoretical knowledge assigned great importance in many other armies, is the price paid for this distinctive military culture.

By way of contrast, the navy and even more so the air force adopted traditions from foreign militaries. The Israeli Air Force, for example, drew on the culture of Britain's RAF (Royal Air Force), whereas Israel's navy and particularly its marine commandos modeled themselves on their Italian counterparts while still honoring the *Palmach's* earlier naval traditions. To be sure, over the years the influence of these different traditions has become less pronounced, although still felt. Even now, the infantry units lean toward a somewhat less rigid, less regulated culture than the navy and air force.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, only once in Israel's history has a non-infantry or non-tank commander been appointed Chief of the IDF General Staff (CoS) – the exception being a former Air Force Commander. In fact, part of his troubles during an abbreviated tour of duty as CoS (2005–2007) traced to the difficulty in shifting from leading the air force, with its highly centralized command structure, to directing ground forces. In conversation with the author, a former Air Force Commander highlighted these contrasting cultures as follows: “execution of an order begins when the Commander of the Air Force issues it, whereas when the CoS makes a decision it merely provides the basis for negotiation.” His comment says worlds about the respective cultures of the air and ground arms of the IDF in terms of structure and chain of command, the first being highly centralized and disciplined, and the second leaning more toward decentralization.

To this day, the IDF ethos lacks sharp definition and reflects a certain degree of tension between its conscript and militia nature on the one hand and, on the other hand, the need to tighten regulations and procedures in a very highly technological army. As a rule, we can assume the greater the applied use of advanced technology and the need for technical precision, the greater the insistence upon order and discipline. Tighter command and control is required in order to minimize errors and accidents. Hence, an emphasis on strict discipline is most noticeable in the air force, the navy and the armored corps – all three entirely dependent on the sophisticated systems and craft they operate – as well as the artillery corps, graded on its ability to shell a specific location at a particular time. By contrast, the infantry corps, whose success has always depended more on the quality of its soldiering and the tactical initiative of its field commanders, allows for improvisation and individuality, even at the price of compromising on discipline, regulations and “soldiering by the book.” The fact that since 1974 all but one of the incumbents of the office of Chief of Staff, who by law is the IDF's commander, had previously been infantry officers, with some additional experience as tank commanders, significantly influences the Force's culture.

The geographic factor

The second element shaping the IDF's development lies in the connection between the geographical landscape within which it operates and those threat agents arising over the years from

within that geographical space. In a word, Israel is a state devoid of strategic depth, the blurring between Israel's civilian and military home fronts having existed already in 1948. This constant need to defend the country's hinterland and citizens remains a vital part of the IDF security doctrine, as mirrored both by its sizeable investment in force development and in planning for rapid, unimpeded force deployment during any future crisis.

As evident from even a cursory glance at the physical map, Israel is a long and narrow country. Its length on a north–south axis running from Metulla to Eilat is approximately 450 kilometers or 279 miles. While this might seem comparatively large, since the expanse from Beersheba to Eilat is entirely desert, the “relevant length” of the country is less than half. Israel's economic, financial, technological and demographic center is heavily concentrated along the Mediterranean seacoast on a narrow strip of just 100 km (62 miles) between Haifa and Ashdod. Moreover, the core of this strategic yet vulnerable “heartland,” the State of Israel's center of gravity, is the still more constricted area immediately surrounding Tel Aviv – the 40 km (24 miles) separating Rishon LeZion from Herzliya.

From a security standpoint, the determining factor is not so much the country's topographical length but its width. The distance from the Mediterranean Sea eastward to the mountainous area overlooking and dominating the coast – known as the “West Bank” and overwhelmingly populated by Palestinian Arabs – is merely 12 km (7.4 miles) at its narrowest (from Netanya to Tulkarm); and from Tel Aviv a mere 25 km (16 miles) at its widest. Even when adding the West Bank to the equation, the country's total width is less than 60 km, or all of 37 miles.

From its very inception the State of Israel (and before it, the pre-state Jewish *Yishuv*) had to confront an existential security threat – a narrow territorial entity with its back to the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded on all sides by Arab foes sworn to its extinction. During the initial stage of the War of Independence, every dispersed Jewish location had to be defended against hostile local Palestinian and non-Palestinian irregular forces, leaving no choice but to dispatch small (mainly *Haganah* and *Palmach*) units to isolated Jewish towns and villages. The security dilemma was compounded when, on the same night that Israel declared independence (May 15, 1948), it was invaded by the regular armies of all the surrounding Arab countries. This new threat compelled an immediate and drastic restructuring. The nascent IDF organized itself into relatively large brigades, making it possible to concentrate military forces previously scattered around isolated locations.

Having suffered a terrible toll in the 1948 fighting – 6,000 casualties, constituting 1% of the total Jewish population of 600,000 – the IDF had to then face the likelihood of further hostilities across vulnerable armistice lines against an Arab bloc committed to Israel's destruction. The precedent thus established remains valid. As soon as one war is over, the IDF must prepare for the next confrontation. Victories in wars – however numerous – will not force Israel's neighbors to sue for peace. Victory in one encounter may serve as a deterrent and delay the next one but will not prevent it.

Founding principles

Notwithstanding the many changes in the ongoing, protracted Arab–Israeli conflict, except for four modifications the “ten commandments” originally laid down by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the IDF's founding fathers remain largely intact and no less convincing today.

- 1 Israel remains divided into three regional commands, each divided into geographic brigades responsible for defending and securing its assigned sector. Northern Command, responsible for Syria and Lebanon; Central Command, on the long eastern front with Jordan; and

Southern Command, facing Egypt and the Gaza Strip. Recently, observation and light infantry troops are on permanent assignment to some of the different sectors along Israel's borders and in the West Bank.

- 2 Organized into mobile divisional formations, both regular troops and reservists can be transferred from one Command to another fairly rapidly, and to different fronts based on changing operational needs. These "spearhead forces," are made up of strong infantry brigades, mechanized infantry, and armored brigades (today all tank brigades deploy the Israeli-made *Merkava*).
- 3 The General Staff located in Tel Aviv exercises overall control of all ground forces through the three regional commands. Only in rare cases, mainly those involving sensitive special operations far beyond enemy lines, will the General Staff assume direct command. That is also the case when ground operations involve soldiers reaching their destination other than via the land border with the country in question.
- 4 Even though the CoS is the ultimate commander of all ground forces, in wartime commanders of the regional Commands retain a remarkably high degree of autonomy that includes control of air and naval forces when and where needed.
- 5 The Israeli Air Force has a distinctive history and tradition, and its development was heavily influenced by the RAF experience during the Battle of Britain. Like Britain in 1940, Israel is like an island, surrounded by enemies, and attaches supreme importance to defending its airspace, which is therefore the Air Force's primary mission. This, in turn, dictates a centralized command and control system leaving little latitude for the individual pilot. The Air Force Commander is responsible for building the forces, from training to maintaining as well as for the Air Force operations, subject to the CoS. For that purpose, he oversees an enormous headquarters staff that filters information, maintains direct communication with pilots and crews and monitors every aircraft in flight. Put differently, the role of base commanders and flight commanders focuses largely on development and training, and not on operational decision-making.
- 6 Like the IAF, all maritime operational decisions in the Israeli Navy as well as building the naval capabilities, are taken at naval headquarters, by the commander of the navy – under the command of the IDF General Staff.
- 7 Because ground forces are subject to mission control by each regional command while aerial forces remain under close supervision by IAF headquarters, there have been difficulties over the years in coordinating between ground and air forces. All aircraft are monitored exclusively by the air force – whether fighters, transport planes, helicopters or UAVs; and whether used for intelligence or attack purposes. The only exceptions are small UAVs assigned to brigades or battalions for intelligence gathering or for target-acquisition purposes, and therefore managed by the ground forces. Due to the two different systems of control, friction and conflicts of interest remain an unsolved problem in the IDF, although improved technology has contributed to closer consultation, communication and coordination during the last few years.
- 8 All security planning by the IDF presupposes that whatever the challenge it will always be asymmetric, due simply to demographics. The combined population of the Arab states amounts to hundreds of millions, while Israel remains several orders of magnitude smaller. As of 2017, Israel was home to slightly more than 6.5 million Jews compared to some 400 million residents of the member countries of the Arab League – more than a third of them in countries bordering Israel. To offset this numerical deficiency, compulsory military service was instituted for Jewish Israelis, both men and women (subsequently for Druze, too) – a practice that remains in force.

- 9 Israel instituted and maintains a “people’s army” in the true sense through a military reserve system patterned on the Swiss model. As of 2017, mandatory service at age 18 consists of two years and eight months for men (reduced from three years) and two years for women. Thereafter, all Israelis under the age of 45 (previously until the age of 55) who served in the IDF, unless otherwise exempt, are theoretically eligible for reserve duty of 30 days per year, with women released from this obligation upon the birth of their first child. As a result, reserve units, their ranks swelled by soldiers having completed their mandatory service, are an important component of the IDF’s ground forces where reservists outnumber conscripts (which is not the case in the navy and air force). Aside from providing a major component of the IDF’s spearhead forces, reserve duty is also an important social factor for Israelis who in all surveys rate the IDF higher than any other public institution in terms of public trust.
- 10 The IDF also seeks to overcome Israel’s quantitative disadvantage by improving the capabilities of its combat troops on the modern battlefield, and hence invests heavily in progressive technological innovation. In the early years, the air force, later followed by the navy, was the main beneficiary of unique systems researched and developed by Israel. Only after suffering heavy casualties during the Yom Kippur War (1973) did the ground forces become major consumers of military technology. Surely the most impressive and meaningful accomplishment of recent years has been IDF success in creating layers of precision air defense against missile and rocket threats facing Israel. The indigenous “Iron Dome” project, together with “Arrow” and “David’s Sling,” jointly sponsored with the United States, have transformed Israel’s active air defense system into one of its largest, important and very expensive security components. Preserving the country’s qualitative edge is not just a slogan; it is an imperative, which guides IDF future investment priorities.

Like any organic body, the IDF must also meet the test of receptivity to change, and be judged by its flexibility.

Four evolutionary trends

Moving from the above ten constants, there are at least four transitions underway with major consequence for the structure, role and actual performance of the IDF. Prompted by developments in the Middle East and a better grasp of the longer-term realities facing the country, and testifying to the evolutionary rather than revolutionary pattern of military change, these four functional adaptations involve administration, civil defense, airpower and targeting intelligence. Each warrants closer analysis.

The burdens of governance

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, administration over the West Bank and Gaza Strip was assigned to the IDF’s Central and Southern Commands, respectively. Southern Command retained military responsibility over the Gaza area even after Israel’s complete withdrawal in 2005. The dividing of responsibility to the Palestinians between two regional commands based on geographical considerations can be problematic in itself, and made even more so since the General Security Service (GSS, Israel’s equivalent of Britain’s MI5), with responsibility for preventing terror attacks in all areas under Israeli control, has become a hugely important partner in both regions. Orchestrating activities quietly and efficiently among different agencies is always complicated. This said, however, cooperation in administering and securing the West Bank and

Gaza between the GSS, a civilian body under the Prime Minister's direct control, and the IDF, has been surprisingly very successful.

Civil defense

During the 1991 Gulf War, a new and very real threat emerged in the form of 39 medium-range missiles launched against Israel from western Iraq. In response, the IDF (acting on a Ministry of Defense decision) set up what is now the Home Command, which assumes direct responsibility from the three respective regional commands for preparing domestic society against the eventuality of war. The moment the alarm sounds of an incoming projectile, and the civilian population is instructed to take cover, the Home Command must deal with the consequences of missile strikes on Israel's interior. Reporting to the CoS but also with a direct line to the Ministry of Defense, the Home Command operates in full cooperation with civilian bodies such as the local municipalities and authorities, *Magen David Adom* (Israel's Red Cross), the police and fire departments.

Aerial and naval power

Despite all the diplomatic and military changes the region has witnessed, the IDF's structural framework has remained fixed – grounded, literally, on the three (now four) spatial directions, as discussed earlier, of the northern, southern, eastern and home fronts. Its corollary – the supreme importance of the ground forces, and the supporting role of the air force secondary to that of the ground forces – has long been taken for granted and gone unchallenged, the consensus being that Israel's wars will be decided on the ground.

Nonetheless, even here a “quiet revolution” may be unfolding in stages. As applied specifically to Israel, with its enhanced aerial and intelligence capabilities, future risk-adverse governments may perhaps decide against deploying their ground forces in hopes of avoiding entrapment in open-ended land fighting, diplomatic crises and heavy casualties. Instead, they might opt for surgical air strikes. But even in such scenarios – where operations are entirely airborne – an air force commander remains subordinate to the CoS.

Something comparable is evolving gradually with respect to the Israeli Navy's status. Traditionally, the naval theater has not been regarded as critical for Israel's vital security so long as Mediterranean Sea shipping lanes remain open to merchant civilian cargo vessels. Consequently, the navy has always been a relatively small and less significant arm of the IDF, even while maintaining a high level of technological and operational capacity over the years. Recently, however, with the acquisition of submarines and the presence offshore of installations exploiting Israel's natural gas fields, now a very valuable economic asset, the navy is assuming a more pivotal role in Israel's strategic defense.

Intelligence gathering and targeting

Never let it be said the IDF has in any way downplayed the contribution of military intelligence to national security. The agencies involved in intelligence – *Aman* (the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate), the *Mossad* and the *Shin Bet* or *Shabak* (the General Security Service) – have always been respected as additional prized instruments for gaining advantage over opponents enjoying numerical superiority.

Even so, the conversion from fighting standing armies to confrontations with sub-state or “hybrid” organizations, parallel with the emphasis on precision munitions, have together

increased the influence and the importance of intelligence processing and the status particularly of the army's intelligence corps. Today they are regarded as a vital part of IDF decision-making at all levels of command.

What makes accuracy doubly important is the necessity for distinguishing between terrorists and innocent civilians, as borne out by the IDF's experience in Gaza and Lebanon. In both cases, *Hamas*, *Islamic Jihad* and *Hizbullah* did their utmost to fudge this distinction by wearing civilian clothing and purposely deploying their fighters and weaponry in civilian areas, among civilians and firing from within civilian facilities such as schools, hospitals and mosques. Only precise intelligence can facilitate precision strikes against terrorists and minimize the number of civilians killed or harmed, thereby reducing the scope of ethical and diplomatic complications likely to be encountered.

In the wake of the IDF's experience in cross-border operations both in southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, Israeli security planners are fully aware by now that in the struggle against Arab terrorism there is no real substitute for accurate intelligence. In conventional warfare, superior firepower and massive ground forces might be able to compensate for the lack of intelligence, even if the cost of operational success becomes a heavier price in casualties and time. However, when waging war against irregular forces or urban terrorists, both on the ground and in the air – as Israel increasingly finds itself doing – without quality intelligence, the enemy remains unidentified, elusive and still at-large.

In conceptual terms, the IDF stands in the forefront of those countries putting a premium on intelligence work, and with two purposes in mind. The first mandates in-depth and ongoing study of Israel's adversaries, their strengths and weaknesses, their deployment plans and intentions. This effort is required to achieve positive results on the battlefield, which will result from attaining maximum intelligence prior to maneuvering. The second aim of intelligence work is to increase prospects for destroying an enemy force or specific targets through the most suitable and effective type of firepower. Adding urgency to the integration and processing of intelligence data is the time factor. One of the principal lessons derived from the fighting in and over Gaza, including most recently in 2014, is the need to deflect international criticism and diplomatic sanctions by completing any assigned mission as surgically and as expeditiously as possible. Operations that do not meet that requirement lack all utility.

Putting performance before theory

After sketching these four evolutionary trends, and before turning to prospects for further reforms, at least one distinctive feature about the IDF mentioned earlier only in passing deserves singling out for further elaboration. It is quite impossible to understand how the IDF functions as an arm of Israeli national security without fully appreciating the path by which potential field commanders and low-ranking officers are groomed for senior posts and then promoted up through the ranks. The salient fact is that Israel and the IDF possess no professional military academy to serve as the first step in promoting officers.

Unlike modern militaries elsewhere, all IDF ground commanders advance through the ranks only by first excelling at soldiering and as junior officers in the field. There are no tests at the time of basic training, or along the way, which stress an officer candidate's academic potential. On the other hand, any draftee unable to complete an obstacle course, for example, or failing a map reading exercise, will advance no further. The situation is slightly different for air force pilots and naval commanders, who are carefully chosen before and during an extended basic training course that assesses a cadet's character and abilities. Even these courses provide no schooling on military history or theory to the extent common in professional militaries worldwide.

This selection method, with its emphasis on “basic soldiering,” has proven an excellent means of building combat cadres, where leadership requires physical fitness and strong tactical command as well as courage and the ability to lead by example on the battlefield. On the other hand, it does not filter out those candidates who might be best suited later on for commanding a division or one of the regional commands. At these senior ranks, personal bravery and leading men under fire may be important, but no more so than the talent for clearly presenting plans to senior officers, or the intellectual ability to analyze complex issues and to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations.

The end result is that officers in the IDF tend to reach senior ranks at a relatively young age with invaluable practical hands-on experience in commanding units at all levels, but without the conceptual frameworks and historical background taught at military institutes and academies around the world. Although some commanders do study for two years at the IDF Tactical Command College before becoming company commanders, and while all officers must attend the IDF Command and Staff College before attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel, this schooling is arguably too little, too late. Thus, in the 70 years of the IDF, beyond authoring personal memoirs, very few high-ranking generals have left behind written works of any enduring value on theoretical subjects regarding the military profession.

The counter-argument of course is that IDF commanders are problem-solvers rather than ivory-tower theoreticians. As the principal defense organ of the state, the IDF engages less in abstract thinking and more in finding creative solutions for the tangible here-and-now security challenges facing Israel.

Added value for Israel comes from the country’s best and brightest – their military service completed after having been given weighty responsibilities and independence at a young age, and provided with specialized training and technical skills – contributing to Israel’s current reputation as a “start-up nation” and global leader in scientific and technological advances.

Signposts of further evolutionary change

To its credit, the IDF continues to assess what further revisions it might or should initiate in its own organizational makeup and character, mandated by changing conditions at home, in the Middle East arena or around the globe. Based upon past performance and barring an unforeseen cataclysmic event, we should not expect to see any fundamental or drastic reform. Rather, the emphases may be changing, almost imperceptibly, both on the ground and in the air.

On the ground

One detects a marked preference by IDF planners and strategists to rely more than in the past on (1) lighter infantry forces and (2) special forces. For the first time, the IDF has created light infantry units in substantial numbers that are limited to a peripheral role during wartime and will certainly not be involved in major combat zones. Instead, they fill the ever-present need for lighter forces to carry out routine security tasks such as guarding the country’s otherwise permeable borders following the construction of a fence along most of them. Outfitted with top-of-the-line observation and tracking equipment, some of these mixed male–female battalions are deployed along Israel’s lengthiest but quieter borders with Egypt and Jordan, two countries with which Israel has binding peace treaties. Others are assigned to full-time supervision of the West Bank’s main roads and the perimeter fences surrounding it.

The multiple benefits of deploying these light infantry units are not hard to see. The rationale behind their formation is that by their fixed deployment they release regular ground forces from

routine monitoring and policing tasks, freeing them instead for more intensive exercises and extensive combat training. Secondly, the nature of their deployment supplies these forces with enhanced opportunities to study in depth the unique characteristics of the area in which they have to operate and the enemy that they have to confront. Furthermore, since they comprise many female soldiers, these units offer women new career possibilities, an important role in contributing to the country's security and opportunities for promotion.

Another indicator of subtle change in the IDF is the structural changes of the special forces that hopefully will be more effective in the war against "hybrid" or irregular forces. Historically, special units or commando forces contributed very little overall in Israel's many and disparate military campaigns, as opposed to their missions between the wars, which contributed considerably to the IDF's achievements. More recently, however, these carefully selected special forces have been elevated in terms of their operational importance. For the first time Israel will field a Special Force Division and a Commando Brigade. The integration of these elite forces into the IDF's military culture and battle plans has proven neither simple nor necessarily smooth. It also remains unclear what impact reliance upon the "special ops" units will have on IDF operational results.

In the air

The change in the IAF's title to the "Air and Space Arm" indicates changing emphases. Nevertheless, here too the pattern is not one of fundamental reforms but of incremental shifts. These are indicated by the introduction of air defense systems, a new generation of stealth fighter craft and unmanned aerial vehicles.

Dependence on active air defense systems such as "Iron Dome," "David's Sling" and "Arrow" 2 and 3 is altering the internal balance within the air arm, which traditionally favored the IAF's array of fighter craft. The task of "defending Israel's skies" is in effect passing from manned air force planes to a network of sophisticated and interoperable anti-missile systems blanketing the country that will be counted upon to play a critical role in securing Israel through enhanced early warning, passive defense and counter-strike capabilities.

Inauguration of the first of 50 F-35I "ADIR" long-range fighter planes procured from the US in 2016 is probably affecting the air force's operational philosophy as well as its centralized command and control system. Equipped with enhanced information-gathering and information-processing capabilities, once fully operational the F-35 squadrons will enable the IAF to expand its mission assignments while inputting its own intelligence data.

The first military to use unmanned aerial vehicles and in particular armed UAVs, the IDF is at the technological forefront of unmanned flight, and will presumably remain one of the leaders in this field. Looking to the future, the mass introduction of larger and more sophisticated drones bears the very real prospect of forcing a change in the ratio between manned and unmanned craft, with the latter assuming more and more tasks. For instance, because the Israeli Air Force does not operate dedicated bombers, bombing missions are carried out by F-15 and F-16 multi-purpose planes – soon to be augmented by the newer generation of F-35s – and by UAVs presently under design. The thrust in drone R&D is to attain the capabilities of piloted planes at a lower cost and without personal risk to pilots. Clearly, an unmanned air force will look very different.

The tendency to improve the IDF missile capabilities, based on the growing need for fire-power in the next round of operations around Israel's borders, might reduce the dependency on the IAF for bombing targets within the range of few hundred kilometers. That step will considerably increase Israel's flexibility and at the same time free more of the Air Force's assets for other missions. It could consequently also alter the existing balance within the structure of the IAF.

Lastly, the IDF, like other militaries, is preoccupied with working out how best to integrate cyber capabilities, for both defensive and offensive purposes. Since it is clear that cyber warfare will become hugely important in coming years, and because there is a long road ahead, the IDF is already investing considerable sums of money and highly talented personnel in this area and is engaged in a deep and broad development of its cyber capabilities. How to organize the new units responsible for cyber, the relationship between offensive and defensive efforts and the ratio between them still remain huge challenges.

Conclusion

The combination of new geopolitical realities and endemic political instability in Middle Eastern regional affairs, together with the Israeli military establishment's deeply embedded organizational principles, imposes four basic missions on the IDF:

- 1 Providing an effective military response to the threat of heightened terrorism in addition to ongoing security problems within and along Israel's borders, across the West Bank and further afield;
- 2 Programing force improvement for a military where a third of its servicemen and women are demobilized, replaced or in special training courses each year, in addition to constantly upgrading its reserve forces;
- 3 Guaranteeing the armed forces' battle readiness against any form of encroachment or provocation on any one of Israel's four fronts, or on all of them simultaneously, with special emphasis to the ability to neutralize and destroy the missiles and rockets capable of reaching Israel's urban areas;
- 4 Ensuring the ability to carry out a number of pinpoint operations – preventive or retaliatory – against select longer-range targets in order to deter or punish distant enemies capable of harming Israel or Israeli nationals.

Confidence in the ability of the IDF, the General Staff and its top echelon of officers derives in large part from past performance under stress. The Israeli army has repeatedly demonstrated impressive improvisational capabilities that have served it, and the country, extremely well during unexpected crises, the best illustration being its recuperative powers in the worst hours and days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Similarly, the IDF's strategic capabilities continue to be highly developed, relying primarily on a highly regarded, modern, operationally tested air force and on a naval arm equipped with submarines capable of operating far from the country's shores.

Yet a third source of encouragement is the human factor. Promotion through the ranks is based on merit, with outstanding soldiers in every cohort chosen to serve as operational commanders and encouraged to sign on as career officers, as are the more gifted men and women soldiers to fill positions in military intelligence. Excellence and professionalism extend to military R & D, where the Defense Ministry and IDF scout out talented high school candidates to devise cutting-edge technologies. This also applies to Israel's highly sophisticated military industries, which continue to supply the IDF with made-in-Israel solutions geared to Israel's particular security needs and battlefield conditions beyond those major weapons systems purchased abroad, mainly from the United States.

Realistically, it is the State of Israel's staying power alone that serves as the ultimate guarantee of its national sovereignty and national security. Until such time as the Arab and Islamic worlds reconcile themselves to the Jewish state's existence, in continuing to confront a hostile environment in the Middle East the country's leaders will always have to find ways of compensating

for profound asymmetries in both population and resources. This obligation to preserve and wherever possible widen Israel's defensive and deterrent qualitative edge falls squarely on the shoulders of the Israel Defense Forces (and the Intelligence community).

Positioned at the center of these efforts, and because Israel is so small and narrow, the IDF cannot consider failure even at the tactical level, let alone think in terms of possible defeat or even a protracted stalemate in future wars. Should deterrence fail, neither Israelis nor the IDF will be given a second chance, or have an alternative safe haven. That the IDF be successful in securing Israel, by itself, is the essence of IDF doctrine.