

# The Development of Security-Military Thinking in the IDF

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In the seven weeks between August 26 and October 17, 1953, Ben-Gurion spent his vacation holding the “seminar,”<sup>1</sup> following which the State of Israel’s security concept was formulated, along with the key points in the IDF doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Ben-Gurion, who had been at the helm of the defense establishment for the Israeli population since the 1930s, argued that he needed to distance himself from routine affairs in order to scrutinize and re-analyze defense strategies.

Ben-Gurion understood that Israel would be fighting differently during the next war – against countries, and not against Israeli Arabs<sup>3</sup> – and that the means, the manpower, and the mindset of the Haganah forces did not meet the needs of the future. This prompted him to concentrate on intellectual efforts, which led to the formulation of an approach that could better contend with the challenges of the future. This was only the starting point in the development and establishment of original and effective Israeli military thinking. This thinking was at the core of the building and operation of military and security strength under inferior conditions, and it enabled the establishment of the state and the nation, almost against all odds.

The security doctrine that Ben-Gurion devised was based on the idea of achieving military victory in every confrontation. During a time when the Jewish population was 1.2 million and vying against countries whose populations totaled about 30 million, this was a daring approach, bordering on the impossible. As far as Ben-Gurion was concerned, it was the only

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logical option, despite the opposition from camps in the military leadership, mainly from ex-Haganah commanders.

Ben-Gurion understood that Israel's advantages derive from a combination of human excellence, along with national spirit and the ability to exploit the topographic conditions that facilitate rapid mobility of concentrated groupings of forces, based on operations within internal lines, in order to create local superiority in every arena. On this basis, he said that: "If they attack us in the future, we do not want the war to be waged in our country, but rather, in the enemy's country, so that we will not be on the defensive, but rather on the offensive. This war is waged not by border settlements, but rather by mobile forces equipped with rapid vehicles and strong firepower."<sup>4</sup> These conclusions led Ben-Gurion to opt for the strategy of maneuver to push the war swiftly into enemy territory. These principles forged the Israeli doctrine for the next three decades and led to a series of impressive military victories.

Although Israel has benefited from nearly absolute military superiority in recent decades, it appears, paradoxically, that its achievements against its enemies are diminishing. Thus, for example, despite the clear gaps in the power ratios between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 and between Israel and Hamas in 2014, the IDF took too much time to reach only partial achievements in the campaigns. Many theoreticians found refuge in the explanation that this is "predestined," as a result of the characteristics of the new confrontations, an explanation that took hold in the Israeli security-military public opinion market.

This article presents an alternative approach, focusing on the argument that this phenomenon derives mainly from the persistent weakening of security and military thinking. It maintains that the principal reason for the inability of the security establishment, and mainly the IDF, to provide a response to the challenges that the State of Israel is facing is not a shortage of resources, but rather derives mainly from a weakening of the structured systems inside the IDF that are tasked with developing and assimilating combat approaches. This article attempts to address several questions: why has Israeli military thinking weakened? What are the implications and repercussions for national security and the State of Israel's military strength? How can security-military thinking be re-positioned in its rightful place at the heart of Israel's national strength? And perhaps the most important question – how should this be accomplished so that the IDF will be adequately prepared for the challenges of the future?

## Militaries in the Information Age: What Happened to Israeli Military Thinking?

Military thinking is an all-purpose term for knowledge developed about war, preparing for war, and waging war. It relies on contemplation that strives to intellectualize the phenomenon of war and to extract universal principles and knowledge that were developed as a result of research and study of the phenomenon of war throughout history. On the other hand, military thinking is inextricably linked to time, place, and specific conditions, since war is a social phenomenon that changes its modes, its means, and the ideas that it serves as mankind evolves. It constitutes a reflection of societies and transforms itself in parallel to the transformation of human societies.

Therefore, military thinking must develop, must be revised, and must keep abreast of changes in the basic data and in the relevant environment. For Israel, military thinking that is creative and vigorous is essential as a foundation for the development of unique security and military strategies and doctrines that address the security challenges. These strategies and doctrines will in turn constitute the theoretical foundation for the development of combat approaches and tactics for force buildup and deployment. However, military thinking is tested in the practical world during war. Its power is not in its ability to explain, but rather, its power is to lead to the correct action. "It is theory that leads to action."<sup>5</sup>

Over the last forty years, with the accelerated evolution from the industrial age to the information age, knowledge has become the most critical resource for organizations and for countries. A country's GDP, as well as its military strength and its ability to influence the international arena, depends today on its ability to acquire and develop knowledge, more than any other resource. Yet the more that Israel's surrounding environment has realized that knowledge is at the heart of quality, is the core of the economy, and is the source of power, the more that Israel's security establishment, and the IDF in particular, has moved in the opposite direction.

The IDF, whose foundations of quality constituted a key component of its strength since its initial days, has become imbalanced over time, the more that its center of gravity has moved increasingly from the quality of its doctrine to the quality of its technology. This was nearly inevitable as a result of the way that the IDF developed. While technology evolved in the open fields of industry, academia, and scientific research, the foundations

of knowledge on which military and security discipline relied were steadily eroding. Why did this happen?

Until the 1970s, the IDF enjoyed exceptional conditions – commanders with extensive operational experience acquired during the wars, a security concept and doctrine that were formulated during the 1950s and 1960s that constituted the basis for military thinking and knowledge, coupled with the “intellectual arm” of officers who were trained in foreign militaries; these officers wrote the combat doctrines and laid the foundation for the IDF’s Doctrine and Training Division. All of these supplemented basic military education, which began as a necessity and became, over the years, a principle in the IDF’s service model and the foundation for its culture and its professional development.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Haim Nadel, who researched the development of IDF military thinking between the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War, describes the “break” that occurred in Israeli military thinking after the Six Day War, which triggered a process of erosion and depreciation.<sup>6</sup> The intoxication of victory and the nearly mythical faith in the power of the armored corps led to neglect of military thinking and to the commanders’ belief that they could manage future battles based on their personal experience. Oral law superseded written law, personal experience replaced in-depth analyses of the experiences of others, and the General Staff doctrines of the IDF’s Doctrine and Training Division were pushed aside to make room for single corps doctrines that were written by the commands and forces from a narrow, temporary, and incidental perspective. Thus, for example, “even though anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles had gradually emerged during air and ground confrontations with Egyptian forces during the War of Attrition, the IDF disregarded this development and suffered from thinking paralysis. Moreover, the IDF failed to learn lessons from other countries that faced similar circumstances,” and failed to develop a comprehensive conceptual and tactical response to them.<sup>7</sup>

It was actually after the Six Day War – a period marked by fundamental changes in the conditions underlying the security approach and when there was a dire need for an extensive, comprehensive, and methodical effort to develop military thinking and to hammer out new doctrines – when the major crisis began in Israeli military thinking, the basis of the entire security structure. The Yom Kippur War signaled a negative turning point, but it appears that the lessons of the surprise attack were attributed more

to intelligence than to aspects of military thinking, combat tactics, and operational plans.

Beginning in the 1990s and in tandem with substantial technological advances, a gradual but ongoing process began that diminished the importance of military thinking and the institutions tasked with its development. Instead of doctrine being the engine driving the conduct of war, technology took its place.

One of the examples of the loss of military thinking mechanisms was reflected in the Doctrine and Training Division, which had been engaged in developing military thinking and imparting it to commanders through combat doctrines, war games, and routine theoretical discussions. During the initial years of the IDF, the Doctrine and Training Division was headed by officers from the IDF's core Operations Directorate; officers influenced how the army was designed and who were outstanding in combat.<sup>8</sup> This role constituted a springboard for them to key military posts, and for good reason. The Doctrine and Training Division had constituted the General Staff's "brain," where thinking is developed and from where the doctrine to all IDF units emanates.

It is possible, for example, to examine the role and standing of the Doctrine and Training Division during Rabin's term as Chief of Staff, which began in 1964. As part of the process led by Rabin and the General Staff under him for the purpose of upgrading the IDF's force buildup, weapons procurement, and training and adapting it for the next battle, the Doctrine and Training Division, headed by Maj. Gen. Zvi Zamir, took action to adapt the training of the various units to operational plans after intelligence was intercepted that indicated that the Egyptian and Syrian militaries had switched to defense formations based on the Soviet doctrine – a development that required the IDF to update and revise its operating doctrine. Even though these changes were sometimes met with opposition from some of the field commanders, the centrality of the General Staff in determining the training framework in general, and the Doctrine and Training Division's control over training in particular, compelled the assimilation of the needed change.

After the Six Day War, a long and protracted trend of erosion of the importance and centrality of the Doctrine and Training Division began, and correspondingly, Israeli military thinking steadily weakened. The breakdown of the IDF's overall combat doctrine into separate doctrines for the various forces, and the severe deficiencies that were discovered in

the combined warfare during the Yom Kippur War led Minister of Defense Moshe Arens to order the IDF to establish a headquarters for the field forces, which was tasked with formulating the combat and organizational doctrine of the field forces.<sup>9</sup>

This was the first step in a process that resulted in the 1992 decision (when the General Staff was headed by Lt. Gen. Ehud Barak) to demote the Doctrine and Training Division from a division of the General Staff to a division subordinate to the Operations Directorate. This caused the division a steady and substantial loss of influence in designing and formulating the force buildup and the operational approach in the IDF. Initially, an officer at the rank of major general was appointed to head it, but as of 2000, requirements for the post were downgraded to brigadier general. This constituted official acknowledgment that military thinking in the IDF was of lesser importance, and was a paradigm shift in what was deemed the core of quality, from military thinking to technology. For the first time since the establishment of the IDF's General Staff Forum, a representative of military thinking was absent from the forum, and so it happened that on the brink of the global entry into the information age (sometime during the 1980s), Israeli security thinking lost its standing in high echelon strategizing. The supporting pillars that provided the foundation for the entire security structure eroded steadily, while technology gained steadily in standing and power.

The gap that developed between the IDF's security approach and combat doctrine and the current reality, which had changed rapidly after the Six Day War and even more so after the Yom Kippur War, remains to be closed; therefore, the doctrine must be updated and perhaps even dramatically revised.<sup>10</sup> Even though there was a dire need to develop an updated doctrine, the security establishment failed to do so. Moreover, the Yom Kippur War signified not only the change in the battlefield, but also constituted a watershed reflecting the profound changes in Israeli society. The 1980s were years of profound geopolitical change in the regional arena and in the international arena; huge chunks of the basic data on which the security concept and doctrine were based had changed unrecognizably, yet nonetheless, the security establishment was unsuccessful in doing as Ben-Gurion had done.

In the absence of the required transformation, the security ship was tossed and battered in the surging waves of reality: a deep budgetary crisis that threatened to topple the Israeli economy in the early 1980s; a crisis of

confidence in non-existential wars; the crisis of the inequitable burden on society, resulting from population segments being exempted from military draft; and the sour achievements in the battlefield during the Lebanon wars, in the security buffer zone, in the years of the first intifada, and in the operations in the Gaza Strip. Despite the widening gaps between the IDF and its enemies, and despite its immeasurably strong economic and technological superiority that were the stuff of the IDF during its first three decades, the outcomes were disappointing.

### **The Shift to Technological-Mathematical Wars: The Shattering of the Vision**

One of the key test cases of the phenomenon relates to the intensity of fire versus maneuver in the IDF's operational response to the threats that developed. Once the information age began, a vision of a technological military began to emerge. The maneuver element was replaced with counter-fire based primarily on technological intelligence.

For many, the Gulf War and subsequently the war in Kosovo signaled the beginning of a new era. An era of clean wars, of screens, and buttons was created – an era in which the art of war was replaced by the science of developing algorithms. Maj. Gen. Israel Tal, who observed this development, warned already two decades ago that “it is a mistake to think that because the means of warfare are becoming more precise and accurate, that war is also becoming ‘mathematical’ and precise.”<sup>11</sup>

The weakening of the doctrinal departments in the General Staff and the severance of the General Staff from the ground forces resulted in the top commands in the IDF neglecting the ground forces that, since that time, have been perceived more as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution, since deploying them is liable to continue over a protracted period and will, with nearly absolute certainty, involve casualties. Moreover, unlike the ground forces, whose deployment requires substantial logistics efforts, the air force is available for immediate delineated deployment (which may be halted at any time) and far from the public eye and does not necessarily commit the state to an actual war. On the face of it, the air force also enables Israel to utilize its technological and military superiority and to employ precision guided missiles, which reduces the risks to IDF forces and to civilian bystanders.<sup>12</sup> It became evident that the temptation to wage clean and precise wars overshadowed the other considerations.

The more that the art of war deferred to precision firepower, the more the balance shifted in force building processes, and the ground force's strike power lost its place and was replaced by intelligence-based firepower. The fact that since Operation Accountability the IDF has increasingly shifted the center of gravity to fire operations only strengthened the trend. The farther that the IDF marched along the path toward a technological military, the less that attention was given to exercises, equipment, emergency stores, and reserve duty; all of these became secondary. The technological approach was not questioned, even after the IDF suffered failures in the battlefield (the security strip, the Second Lebanon War, and the various operations in the Gaza Strip).<sup>13</sup> There were many explanations for this, all of which led to the inevitable conclusion – that the IDF must continue strengthening its technological advantage. On the other hand, another conclusion also became incontrovertible: that it is impossible to be victorious in these types of confrontations.

The quality imbalance that was created between military thinking and technological thinking caused a shift in priority from the combat doctrine units to the units developing war materials, from operational solutions to technological research and development. In the emerging reality, even when efforts were exerted and combat strategies were developed by the Training and Doctrine Division and the Operations Directorate, they had almost no impact on the force buildup axis, which continued to be technology-centric. Combat doctrines not only were not the engine that pulled technology along behind it, but rather, the opposite – “unfortunately, the investment in developing a doctrinal-professional-command response is negligible, compared to the investment in researching and developing the technological response.”<sup>14</sup>

### **What Must be Done?**

In his book on national security, Israel Tal states that “the principles of the security doctrine and the concept of the basic organization and structure of the IDF were defined in the 1950s; since then, Israeli military thinking has not been much more than a footnote to the military thinking that was forged back then. The fundamentals are the same fundamentals.”<sup>15</sup> In his opinion, notwithstanding the dramatic changes that occurred in the security and military reality, Israel persisted in relying on insights and ideas that were devised to contend with completely different challenges and conditions.



Intellectual superiority over the enemy is one of the keys for improving operational effectiveness. This superiority is evident in two distinct areas – in creating the advantage in the learning competition between confrontations, and in the ability to adapt and draw tactical conclusions during a confrontation. On the one hand, the capability of the IDF and the security forces to learn quickly, to adopt modes of action while internalizing new means, were at the basis of the superiority that developed during the battles against the terrorist organizations during the second intifada. On the other hand, the security establishment failed in its preparedness to overcome the threat of the tunnels. Even though the IDF knew about this threat since 2003, the internal IDF investigation following Operation Protective Edge, led by Maj. Gen. Yossi Bachar, a paratroopers officer who commanded the Gaza Division, said that “prior to the operation, the attack tunnels were an unknown factor for most of the commanders of the maneuvering forces. They were aware of the threat, but they failed to recognize its intensity and magnitude.” As a result, the IDF did not train forces in subterranean combat, did not procure adequate engineering means to destroy tunnels and did not prepare a comprehensive tactical plan for eliminating this threat.<sup>16</sup> Israel was also very late in responding to the threat of the enemy’s steadily advancing high trajectory fire capabilities, and was too late in comprehending the implications of the growing momentum in public awareness and legal campaigns. The IDF demonstrated impressive adaptive capabilities during clashes, but inferior capabilities in identifying challenges in advance and building effective responses to them, before a confrontation erupted.<sup>17</sup>

The rationale for the need to develop military thinking in the IDF is twofold: training and educating the entire command backbone; and building the organizational mechanisms for the development and assimilation of military thinking. The military profession, like any other profession, requires a foundation of specialization and knowledge development. Learning from experience is limited, because knowledge is rarely acquired on battlefields, which are the sole qualifying “laboratories” of the military profession. Therefore, the component of education, military studies, and research, which mainly impart the experience of others, are the main tools used to develop military expertise and know-how. There is no way to create military expertise in the currently existing structure, processes, and culture in the IDF. Without experts and expertise in the security and military knowledge worlds, knowledge and innovation cannot be expected

to develop, and without doctrinal innovation, improvement in operational effectiveness can hardly be expected.

The *IDF Strategy* document published in 2015 placed renewed emphasis on ground maneuver. According to this new document, in a future confrontation, the IDF will operate “an immediate and synchronized combined strike” that includes rapid and aggressive maneuvers and massive precision firepower. Concurrently, processes were implemented to restore the General Staff’s responsibility as the ultimate commander deploying the ground forces. Besides the aspects of force deployment, the IDF strategy identifies the need to develop and establish military thinking and the requisite conditions for creating intellectual superiority, which will help the IDF, alongside its technological innovation, create innovative doctrines. To this end – which still constitutes the basis for the security establishment’s military thinking – the IDF needs to take a number of substantial measures to transform the vision into a viable reality.

First, there is a need to relink the elements of the “General Staff brain” while creating tight linkage between knowledge development and assimilation processes and force deployment systems. The Operations Directorate and the Doctrine and Training Division used to be the engine that drove this purpose of the General Staff, but they were divided and weakened over the years. It is essential to reconnect them and reinstate their standings and authorities. The IDF Operations Directorate was split between the Operations Directorate and the Planning Directorate. These two directorates need close coordination between them and, equally important, they must be delegated the authority and standing that will enable them to lead and guide the central processes vis-à-vis the forces and units. The appointment of a Deputy Chief of Staff to head the staff in a full time position, as in the former example of the head of the Operations Directorate, is a recommended course of action that is capable of implementing this approach.

Restoring military doctrine to its proper place, after it was ejected from the General Staff’s agenda over the last three decades, is the second necessary step. Today the commanding officer of the colleges is responsible for the training of senior officers, but does not engage at all in developing military thinking and doctrine. Tightening the link between the Doctrine and Training Division and the military colleges is critical in order to renew the connection between developing military thinking, drafting of doctrines, and assimilating them during officer training. For too many years, the

doctrines written by the IDF have been “left on the shelf,” while on the other hand, the knowledge that develops during the encounter between cadets and instructors during senior officer training courses is not incorporated in the doctrines. This reality must change.

When it comes to force buildup, at a time when the IDF is developing strategies to guide the force buildup processes, the systems are disconnected, and at the same time, it is operating force buildup processes, including resource-intensive projects, in complete disregard of these strategies. The training system, the force buildup system, and the force deployment system need to be reconnected.

The fact that the direct personal experience of most of the IDF’s officers was acquired in the tactical battlefields during limited confrontations has made it difficult for the IDF to acquire expertise in the military profession. In-depth training courses, studies, and learning are mandatory for every person in the military. In order to accomplish this, it is proposed that the stages of officer training be revised, with a culture of research, study, and writing as routine practice between the training period and the service period. A professional command backbone specializing in the military profession, and not based solely on its own experience, is critical in order to reignite the momentum in military thinking.

In addition, the IDF must create an echelon of doctrinal experts – citizens and officers in active duty, who “possess” the knowledge of this discipline, and who serve as aides and anchors for the development of military thinking. In the information age, the quality of an organization is measured by the quality of the experts working in it. In the absence of experts, the IDF is forced to receive help from temporary external advisors, a phenomenon that is injurious over time, since it undermines the development of ongoing knowledge acquisition by commanders within the IDF who are attuned to doctrinal knowledge and to the units in the field, to the state of their training, and to the nature of the threats. The development of a service track for military researchers in the various disciplines, which constitute the core of military knowledge, is needed for the purpose of creating military thinking capable of contending with the pace of the changes dictated by reality.

## Conclusion

In 2015, more than 40 years after the Yom Kippur War, the IDF issued the *IDF Strategy* document, whose purpose is to guide force buildup and force deployment. The IDF now has a document on comprehensive thinking that

constitutes the fundamental concept for contending with the challenges that it faces, but it is still too early to assess how this document will translate from orderly thinking into action, and how it will stand up against the challenges of time, organizational politics, daily pressures, and more.

In the information age, extreme asymmetry has developed in the IDF between the pace and mode of development of scientific and technological knowledge and the impaired development of military thinking. Under this reality, there is a growing temptation to find solutions to military problems in the civilian knowledge market and to harness them for military applications, in a difficult and Sisyphean effort to develop solutions based on military thinking. In the IDF, which was built from the outset as an anti-professional military, this matter becomes acute.

The core information of military organizations is organized according to its doctrine, from the highest echelons – the national security documents – to the techniques and procedures at the lowest echelon. These documents constitute the information infrastructure that was gleaned from the organization's experience and from the experiences of others; they are used by the operations commanders when they develop tactical strategies and plans to resolve battlefield problems, and they constitute the foundation for building military strength and for developing capabilities to contend with the challenges of the future reality.

Like any professional discipline, the doctrine needs to be based on the knowledge accumulated from past experience while taking a prospective outlook, and relevant knowledge needs to be developed about the challenges of the future. And like any professional discipline, it requires expertise from its professionals, acquired through many years of study, research, and analysis before they can build their own new knowledge bank.

After three decades during which the IDF has invested enormous sums creating a technological advantage – while the feeling is that the gap from the enemy is only narrowing – the IDF must change direction and direct the spotlight on intellectual quality. This is what supported Israel when the IDF was first formed, under far more difficult conditions, and it is also used today as the foundation for the growth of the start-up nation that is propelling the Israeli economy forward in major leaps. Intellectual quality is the only element that has the power to build and operate effective national strength against the challenges of the future.

## Notes

- 1 This was “the second seminar” that Ben-Gurion held to study Israel’s security problems. He held the first one in 1947. See Ofer Shelah, *Dare to Win* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2015), pp. 15-18.
- 2 This article makes use of the term “doctrine,” which means: the tactical approach or tactical theory of a military organization in general and, in the concrete context, of the IDF.
- 3 During the War of Independence, Israel initially fought against Palestinian gangs, such as during the battles fought by the Palmah (elite force of the Jewish underground army, the Haganah) on the Jerusalem front, including Operation Yevusi and Operation Danny; it was only during the second stage that Israel fought against Arab militaries, including the armies of Egypt and Jordan. After the war, the political threat intensified.
- 4 David Ben-Gurion, *Singularity and Purpose*, 3rd ed., ed. Gershon Rivlin (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1980), p. 142.
- 5 Yehoshofat Harkabi, *War and Strategy* (Ministry of Defense Publication, 1999), p. 360.
- 6 Haim Nadel, “The IDF’s Military Thinking between the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War (1967-1973),” doctoral dissertation under the guidance of Prof. Yoav Gelber (Haifa University, 2002), p. 14.
- 7 Doron Almog, “Lessons from the Six Day War as a Crisis in the Development of the Combat Doctrine,” *Maarachot* 354 (November 1997): 7.
- 8 The commanders who headed the Doctrine and Training Division included Haim Laskov, Yitzhak Rabin, Zvi Zamir, Yeshayahu Gavish, Ariel Sharon, Yossi Peled, and Yitzhak Mordechai.
- 9 The State Comptroller, *Annual Report 51A*, 2000, pp. 128-29.
- 10 In this regard, see Israel Tal, *National Security: The Few Against the Many* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1996), p. 215, “The security doctrine lost equilibrium after the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. It became incompatible with the changes in the basic elements of the basic strategies after each of the two wars.”
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- 12 Gershon Hacohen, *What is National about National Security?* (Ben-Shemen: Modan and Ministry of Defense 2014), pp. 95-97.
- 13 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *Spider Webs* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2008), pp. 76-85.
- 14 Boaz Amidror, *Cease Fire, IDF, IDF* (Ben-Shemen: Modan and Ma’arachot Publishing, 2017), p. 185.
- 15 Tal, *National Security: The Few Against the Many*, p. 218.
- 16 Gal Perl Finkel, “Cognizance is More Important than Information,” INSS blog *Shorty*, October 25, 2016.
- 17 Yiftah S. Shapir and Gal Perl, “Subterranean Warfare: Old-New Challenge,” in *The Lessons of Operation Protective Edge*, eds. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute of National Security Studies, 2014), pp. 51-57.