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# IDF Strategy Documents, 2002-2018: On Processes, Chiefs of Staff, and the IDF

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Writing and releasing strategy documents has become a norm in the IDF in the last two decades; most were published internally within the military. This article presents the contents of the documents published from 2002 to 2018, focusing on several questions: Why were they published; what needs do they address? What was the process of developing the knowledge, and what staff work was required to prepare each document? How was the Chief of Staff involved in this process? What are the main changes from previous documents? After presenting the documents, the article considers the increasing frequency of updates, the purpose of each document as seen by the Chief of Staff, and the influence of the document on the IDF as part of the “open discourse space” between the IDF and the political echelon. The article is a preliminary comparative study of this developing phenomenon in the IDF, giving an important glimpse into the General Staff processes.

*Keywords:* IDF strategy documents, Chief of Staff, learning processes, political-military discourse, civil-military relations

## Introduction

*The IDF Strategy document* prepared and published by Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot in August 2015 made waves in the media and brought this type of document to public attention. Eisenkot released the document in order to increase the transparency between the IDF, the political echelon, and the public, and to encourage the political echelon to relate to the ideas expressed in it as a response of sorts to the absence of official national security documents. Eisenkot's document was the fourth of this type since 2002. This article describes the four documents (in fact five, since Eisenkot updated the document in 2018) with the focus on the following questions:

- a. What was the reason for release, i.e., what needs did this document address?
- b. What type of process and what staff work was involved to develop the knowledge required for its preparation, and how was the Chief of Staff involved?
- c. What were the main changes introduced in each document?

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Each document is described separately with reference to these questions, followed by a discussion of the broader theme: What does this series of documents tell us about the IDF as an organization, and what role do they play in what the literature calls “the open discourse space” between the different echelons of Israeli society.

The various documents share a number of features. The first is their structure, consisting of the following elements: clarification of the threats in the strategic environment; principles of IDF approaches to action in the face of these threats; the basic organization of command and

control; and the capabilities to be developed through force design. Documents of this kind do not include a detailed analysis of a specific enemy or a specific response to that enemy. They present what the IDF calls “operational concepts,” in effect, the IDF strategies employed in the different arenas (for example, dealing with Iranian activity in the north). These concepts utilize the terminology and processes described in the strategy documents with reference to a defined operational problem, and propose a concrete response that is developed pursuant to war plans or routine security campaign plans.

Compared to the past, when such concepts were not put into writing and the outcome of the thinking process was a plan that in most cases was not implemented, in recent years the IDF has produced more and more conceptual documents. These documents are based on in-depth thinking and provide a systemic analysis and definition of the context in which the concept was developed, so that it can be challenged and adapted as the context changes. It is therefore surprising that the IDF strategy documents are not actually strategy documents in the familiar sense of a targeted response to a military challenge in a concrete context, requiring a new strategy when the problem or the context changes, but rather descriptions of the concepts that help to develop these strategies. For this reason, the document titles often include the words “operational concept” together with the word “strategy” (the problematic name for these documents resembles the problem with the term “chief of staff,” referring to the person who is actually commander of the IDF and not head of the staff).

The second common denominator is the opening statement that in view of the ever-changing reality, it will be necessary to review and update the documents regularly. Another shared feature is that all the strategy documents are intended to show changes and learning in the IDF and present their products, particularly in areas such as the range of threats to be faced

and the principles of types of action. Most of them deal with the past and the present, and with respect to the future, it is generally a matter of continuing existing trends, and the perceived horizon is just a few years ahead. The fourth common denominator is that all the documents were written for the army's internal needs and therefore use military language, with concepts that are not always clear to the political echelon or the general public (for example, the documents of 2015 and 2018). Moreover, the interface between the top ranks of the IDF and the political echelon with regard to approval of the documents was quite limited. This was not because of IDF unwillingness to present them for discussion and approval, but because of the traditional Israeli lack of official national security documents, expressing an open preference by the political echelon not to commit to a particular approach, but to approve whatever the IDF presents, even if generally and in retrospect (Shelah, 2016). One could argue that there is a deliberate disconnect between the politicians and the military, apparently in order to maintain the freedom of action of the former, although in recent years there have been calls in the political echelon to close this gap (Shelah, 2016).

The final common denominator is that responsibility for preparing the document was assigned to the Operations Branch/J3 (Amatz), whose head was personally involved in the work, while the main staff element in its development was the Training and Doctrine Division (Tohad). Parts of the document were also prepared by the Intelligence Directorate/J2 and the Planning Directorate/J5.

### **The Strategy Documents: The Product of Knowledge Development Processes in the IDF**

The IDF strategy documents are the product of preliminary studies of Israel's environment and the planned IDF response—in terms of force design, emphases in force employment, organizational changes, and more. Learning

in militaries has been widely studied and includes, among other approaches, learning the lessons of one's own wars, learning by emulating other armies, and innovation based on experimenting with developing capabilities. (For a comprehensive review of various patterns of learning in militaries, see Finkel, 2020). Like any army, the IDF has its own strategic culture, which influences the attention given to each type of learning.

In the research literature on military innovation, the IDF of the 1990s and 2000s is described as an organization relying to a great extent on its own war experience, and afterwards as adopting American ideas without critical examination, with a tendency to look for technological solutions, a preference for practitioners over theorists, difficulty taking the long view due to the heavy load of routine security activity, and more (Adamsky, 2012, pp. 190-194). These descriptions paint a picture that contains some truth, but the reality during this period was far more complex (on the process of conceptual experimentation in the 1990s, and the cautious nature of Israeli learning from the American experience in the Iraq War, see Finkel, 2020). The sources of learning and the learning methods used while developing the strategy documents vary from case to case and incorporate, based on the period and its challenges, the types of learning mentioned above.

From a theoretical point of view regarding the types of learning used to develop the strategy documents (analytical learning that breaks down problems, which is characteristic of military post-action reviews, or holistic thinking that takes a systemic view of problems; see Lanir, 1997; 1999), the IDF strategy documents were not developed according to the [design approach](#), as they were not intended to develop a concrete strategy for a specific enemy or to solve a problem, but rather to build the world of military concepts and terminology to be used for that purpose. In recent years the IDF has made intensive use of the design approach to develop operational

concepts regarding its enemies (for a partial list, see Finkel & Ortal, 2019) or concepts for force design. The knowledge development for writing IDF strategy documents is closer to what is called staff research and staff work, where the main discussion focuses on the array of concepts appearing in the document; how to define the nature of the enemy and its patterns of action; what is the IDF's modus operandi in principle; and what are the latest and most relevant definitions of defeat, deterrence, victory, and so on with respect to an enemy. In fact, the IDF strategy documents (although they contain the word strategy) are a kind of doctrinal document that institutes "a system of interpretive terms" (Lanir, 1998) that is relevant for that period.

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### **In the Inter-Echelon "Open Discourse Space"**

The complexity of military activity in recent decades, particularly when dealing with terror organizations, led to a recognition of the difficulty faced by armies attempting to propose effective military actions, and the difficulty faced by political leaders attempting to define clear achievements for the army (for a review, see Michael, 2016 and the sources cited). This recognition led to the understanding that in the framework of the primacy of the political echelon over the military echelon, and the separation between them, it is vital to conduct a dialogue that is not the product of a simple hierarchical process in which the political echelon dictates tasks to the military echelon, but rather includes a joint investigation and clarification of the situation and the best way

to use military force in order to achieve political goals that are difficult to conceptualize—what Michael calls: "the open discourse space." The outcome of the process is the same as in the past—directives from the politicians to the military—but the way these instructions are developed is different and more complex.

A similar trend exists in the military echelon. On the one hand, several ranks must cooperate to develop shared knowledge, abandoning the hierarchical approach that divides them (Lanir, 1997); on the other hand, it is becoming more difficult to achieve conceptual unity with respect to dynamic and complex challenges, requiring more dialogue between the different ranks (Finkel, 2018b). Within this complexity, and perhaps as an inadvertent part of the response to it, it has become necessary to prepare and issue IDF strategy documents that enable the General Staff to work together with the various services and regional commands to develop a basic "system of interpretive terms," for use in the preparation of concrete strategies (and in the discourse with the political echelon).

### **IDF Strategy Documents and their Counterparts in the United States and Britain**

Various kinds of strategy documents have been written in the United States over the years. The Goldwater-Nichols Act ([Public Law 99-433, Oct. 1, 1986](#)) defines the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as part of a wider reform of the US Armed Forces, and stipulates inter alia that the Secretary of Defense must prepare and publish an annual report. This document must include national security objectives and policies, priorities with respect to military tasks, and the allocation of resources for the period, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is required to assist the Secretary in this work (Section 153 of the Act). Since 2002, the following documents have been anchored in legislation: the [National Security Strategy](#), signed by the President; the [National Defense Strategy](#), signed by the Secretary of Defense; and the [National](#)

**Military Strategy**, signed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The latter document is written in the military, and by law must refer in detail to the manner in which the US armed forces respond to the main threats to national security, as described in the documents by the President and the Secretary of Defense. American law also specifies the frequency that documents must be updated, to whom they must be submitted for approval, and more. A critical article of 2017 claims that the result is a “cacophony” of strategic documents, and the number should be reduced to prevent overlap (Karlin et al., 2017).

In Britain, several documents have been written by the political echelon, under the general heading of Defence Review. In 2010 it was stipulated that such documents must be updated every five years (for a survey of these documents, see House of Commons Library, 2020).

In Israel, on the other hand, there are no such official documents published by the political echelon. A central attempt to formulate such a document was made in 2004-2006 by the Meridor Committee, but it was never published (Meridor & Eldadi, 2018). In August 2018 it was announced that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had updated Israel’s security concept, but this was never fully disclosed (Prime Minister’s Office, 2018). Consequently, the military documents are in effect the most significant official Israeli security documents written by senior figures in existence.

### **IDF Strategy: Trends and Basic Ideas for Force Design and Employment under Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, April 2002**

This document was published four months before the end of Shaul Mofaz’s tenure as Chief of Staff, in effect a way of leaving his stamp on the organization by documenting his work. At a seminar in 2000, Mofaz explained that one purpose of the document was to define a shared strategic language for the IDF (*IDF Strategy*, 2002, p. 11).

In terms of process, the document presented areas of knowledge that developed in three largely separate channels. The first, the “Spring of Youth” work done in 1998-1999 on IDF organization, was reflected in the organizational change known as IDF 2000 (Mofaz presented its essence in a short article in *Maarachot*, Mofaz, 1999). The second channel was a series of conceptual workshops in 1999-2000 on defining the challenges and the responses by type of threat (the Palestinians, Syria, third circle). The third channel was knowledge developed during the terms of Ehud Barak and Amnon Lipkin-Shahak as Chiefs of Staff in the context of fighting the Syrian army. The chiefs of staff guided the process and discussed the material produced by the teams. The document was prepared by the head of the History Department, Col. (res.) Yigal Eyal, and as head of the Training and Doctrine division, Brig. Gen. Gershon Hacohen wrote in the introduction, “This book does not amount to instructions to be followed, but rather presents the reader with a comprehensive survey of basic ideas, formulated in the IDF over the last four years” (*IDF Strategy*, 2002, p. iii).

The introduction indicates the reason for writing the document:

The new reality poses many additional challenges to the IDF—challenges that did not form part of the traditional security concept shaped by David Ben Gurion. Countries have left the circle of hostility (Egypt, Jordan) and distant countries with extremist ideological regimes (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan) have become threatening strategic elements; this affects the response and force design, and the Palestinian issue has changed from a refugee problem to a struggle with clear nationalist signs. (*IDF Strategy*, 2002, pp. 4-5)

Consequently, the nature of the hostilities has changed—limited confrontation with the Palestinians has developed and strategic

weapons, such as ground-to-ground missiles and nonconventional weapons, have entered the arena. In view of these needs, the writers of the document focused on the following:

- a. *Definition of the threats by circles*: Four circles of confrontation were defined: the inner circle—the home front, the Palestinians (countering terror, guerrilla warfare, and a popular uprising); the first circle—the front; the second circle—Iraq; the third circle—Iran and Libya. Organizing the threats by range reflected the correct perception for the time, that in kinetic action, the range is the main factor that affects the type of response (*IDF Strategy*, 2002, pp. 98-103).
- b. *Limited confrontation with the Palestinians*: A substantial part of the document was devoted to a description of the characteristics and the response—a strategic situation assessment specific to this type of confrontation, with emphasis on the rising role of the media as a weapon in the hands of the Palestinians, and on building a capacity to disperse demonstrations.
- c. *Civil-military relations* and the subject of social cohesion are discussed at length in the document, apparently because of what developed regarding the withdrawal from Lebanon at the start of Mofaz's term, and particularly following the ongoing fighting in the West Bank (and the attacks within the State of Israel that accompanied it) (*IDF Strategy*, 2002, pp. 20-25).
- d. *The idea of the offensive defense based on standoff fire in the face of a massive Syrian armored attack*: At that time Syria was the main motive for building IDF strength in terms of army size and weapons purchase (but not with regard to training, which was channeled to the struggle with the Palestinians). The idea of offensive defense addressed the systemic destruction of armored fighting vehicles (AFV) through standoff fire, in order to break an armored Syrian attack. This capability, whose development began in the early 1990s, reached full maturity

under Mofaz (for details of the idea of AFV destruction, see Finkel, 2018a, pp. 159-167).

- e. *Organization of the General Staff and its contribution to strengthening the IDF's ability to deal with new challenges*: The document establishes the move by Mofaz to reorganize the General Staff and other high level headquarters under the heading IDF 2000 and included: fully dividing the Staff Directorate (Agam) between the Operations Directorate (Amatz) (a new body) and the Planning Directorate (Agat); converting the Ground Forces Headquarters (Mafhash) to the Ground Forces Command (Mazi); and uniting the combat service support corps in the Technological and Logistics Directorate (Atal) (*IDF Strategy*, 2002, pp. 123-125; for details of this move, see Finkel, 2020).

Since the organizational change in the IDF was far-reaching, perhaps the largest since its inception, the document dealt at length with the reasons, focusing on changes in the strategic environment:

The organizational change arose from the obligation to improve and adapt operational capability (the response) to changes in the strategic environment, to resource constraints, and to develop capabilities (technology, weapons, human capabilities, and so on)...The biggest change in the IDF in recent years arose from the understanding that without the change, the IDF will have difficulty fulfilling its mission, and that its commanders have the duty of initiating a process that will enable the IDF to deal with future challenges. The organizational change is therefore a component of the ongoing strategic thought process (the army as a learning organization). The changes in the framework of IDF 2000 must be examined continually in order to monitor the army's ability to provide a response to changes in the

strategic environment. (*IDF Strategy*, 2002, pp. 28-30)

Thus, the document formalized knowledge developed during Mofaz's tenure as Chief of Staff about the nature of the confrontation and fighting in the Palestinian arena, the response to a challenge such as the Yom Kippur War, and the organizational changes implemented. While the first four subjects dealt with the establishment of knowledge already existing in the system (which was developed previously), the last subject, the reorganization of the General Staff, was a new idea.

### **The IDF Operational Concept under Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, April 2006**

Notwithstanding the name of the document, which lacks the word "strategy," this document matches its predecessors and successors. Of the various versions of IDF strategy documents, this is the most familiar and was discussed at length in the Winograd Commission Report (Winograd Commission, 2007, pp. 268-274; Preisler-Swery, 2017; a detailed analysis of the assimilation of the concept appears in Finkel, 2020) because of its links, or attributed links, to the failures of the Second Lebanon War. The document was published about a year after Chief of Staff Halutz took office, although it is based on far-reaching work that was mainly done during the term of his predecessor, Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon in 2004-2005. The document was partly implemented and shelved after the Second Lebanon War.

In the context of process there was a development of new knowledge for the IDF in a range of fields, led by Ya'alon in a series of positions that he held—GOC Central Command, Deputy Chief of Staff, and Chief of Staff (the process was presented from a number of viewpoints, including by Tamari & Kalifi, 2009; Adamsky, 2012, pp. 163-174; Finkel, 2020). The process was managed by the head of the Training and Doctrine Division, Brig. Gen. Meir Kalifi, and the head of Amatz, Maj. Gen. Israel Ziv. It included workshops with

numerous participants and a wealth of exercises and practical experiences of the various fields. Chief of Staff Ya'alon was personally involved in developing the concept and spent much of his time on the matter. The answer to the question of why he did not publish the document lies apparently in his approach to the process of knowledge development as an ongoing learning effort, and not a process that ends with the release of the document. Chief of Staff Halutz was involved in the processes as part of his previous jobs—Deputy Chief of Staff, and before that, head of Amatz/J3—and when he took over as Chief of Staff he completed the process. This was the only time among the cases described that development of the concept occurred in parallel to the process of developing the national security concept, led by Knesset Member Dan Meridor (the work led by Meridor focused on the military aspects of national security). The various documents contain some shared ideas, such as the rising importance of home front defense and the use of standoff fire, at the expense of ground maneuvers and seizure of territory.

The contents of the document were discussed after the Second Lebanon War; suffice it here to mention the article by Dana Preisler-Swery, a researcher at the Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies, who showed that the concept dealt with a number of central ideas, some in the context of general methodology—how the IDF needs to organize and think—and some in the context of the main enemy. Most of the ideas were new for their time (Preisler-Swery, 2017):

- a. *The Methodological Aspect—the SOD (System Operational Design) process at the strategic-operational levels: a methodological process that adapts the learning theory to the challenges faced by senior ranks.*
- b. *Definition of the command and control approach, whereby the head of the relevant command also commands the campaign:* The new approach was based on the

operational level in the IDF, which the concept identified as the focus of influence, headed by the “operator.” This level is a separate intermediate layer that connects the strategic level with the tactical level, and its task is to bridge the gap between abstract strategic ideas and concrete military action.

- c. *Effects-Based Operations* were developed in the United States and adopted by the IDF, despite some criticism. The concept is intended to achieve decision through a focused attack on various centers of gravity in the enemy’s system, creating effects that will lead to a strategic victory.
- d. *Jointness*: An organizational concept that was developed in order to enlarge the range of options and the abilities to take relevant and effective action in the face of existing and emerging challenges, and in particular to create the needed integration of forces (military and non-military) to ensure the suitability and optimal utilization of the force at any given time.
- e. *With respect to specific enemies*: a decisive end to the limited and ongoing confrontation with the Palestinians, operational level fire to decide hostilities with countries, instead of maneuvers to capture territory (perceived as a burden because of the guerrilla warfare IDF forces will have to face).

Some of the changes mentioned above—with emphasis on military language, the ability of heads of regional commands to command the campaign, and the element of fire—were criticized in the Winograd Report (Winograd Commission, 2008, pp. 268-275). An important fact for understanding the difficulties of developing and introducing the concept was the attempt—as defined by Itai Brun, commander of the Dado Center after the war, who investigated the concept, and Preisler-Swery (2017)—to include in the document a broad and varied array of elements. Each element was at a different stage of development and practical experience (Finkel, 2020). The close link between the three most complex

issues for implementation—SOD; effects-based operations; and the regional command as the campaign “operator” meant to implement the first two elements—where each was at a different stage of maturity in the IDF, was apparently the main source of the challenge of introducing the concept and the fact that it was not utilized in the Second Lebanon War. It is also possible that the IDF of that time lacked a culture of implementing innovative ideas from above and intellectual criticism from below, to examine, challenge, and offer concepts that stimulate fruitful tensions.

The need for a new document in this case lay in the new ideas developed in the IDF after studying how the United States Army functioned in the Iraq War in 2003, and the development of systemic thinking, which began as a response to the complexity of the challenges in the West Bank and was later applied to all IDF modus operandi (Finkel, 2020).

### **IDF Strategy under Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, October 2013**

This document was published in late 2013, almost three years after Gantz took over as Chief of Staff, well into the civil war in Syria, and during the negotiations on a nuclear deal with Iran. In terms of process, work on the document began during the term of Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and continued under Gantz, with the actual writing done by the Dado Center in the Operations Branch/J3 (Amatz), and later handled personally by the head of Amatz, Maj. Gen. Yoav Har Even.

Gantz underwent a personal learning process during his tenure (which was not by means of the General Staff work or workshops), the results of which were published in an August 2013 document called “IDF 2025—Vision and Directions for Action.” The insights he gained from his personal learning process fed the strategy document published in October 2013—there was no process of developing knowledge through workshops, expert teams, and so on. Gantz approved the document at a number of

General Staff discussions. Unlike its predecessor, this document was not intended to innovate but to reflect the existing situation, and thus formed a platform for shared language rather than guidance for force employment or design (Har Even, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Four main new subjects appeared in the concept:

- a. *Conceptualization of three IDF operational modus operandi*—“emergency situation” was added to the “routine” and “wartime” situations defined by his predecessor Ashkenazi. The need for this new category arose from Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza (2012), which was neither a routine situation nor officially a war, but was a situation that might develop from the “campaign between wars” (CBW):

The use of force in a state of emergency includes operations characterized by high-intensity use of military force. As a rule these operations are restricted to one arena or one front. The disruption to routine life on the home front will be limited as far as possible. The rationale for using force in an emergency includes retaliation, (significant) damage to the enemy’s force development, and renewal of deterrence. (*IDF Strategy*, 2013, p. 22)

For the purpose of emergency action, a “deterrent operation” was defined: “The logic underlying the idea of deterrence is to ‘persuade’ the enemy that the price and/or the risk of a particular course of action that it might choose is greater than any foreseeable benefit to be gained from that action” (*IDF Strategy*, 2013, p. 27). This type of operation was not presented as a substitute for decisive operations, but as an additional type of operation suitable for emergencies.

- b. *Definition of a new pattern of action*—CBW: “The rationale for force employment in the

campaign between wars in routine times is to damage the enemy’s attempts to build strength, to create deterrence and better conditions for operations and wars, and to create the potential to delay high-intensity use of the force (in emergencies [see above] and wars)” (*IDF Strategy*, 2013, p. 29). The principles of CBW force employment were later defined.

- c. In the framework of operations whose purpose is a decisive victory, significant emphasis was given to the need for action in operational depth. Based on this insight, Gantz set up a Depth Command in early 2012.
- d. *Cyber*: Throughout the document there is emphasis on the threats in cyberspace that demand increased protection, as well as the need to make maximum use of this space for intelligence and attack. The document does not deal with the General Staff organizational changes required in this regard.

The need for a new document arose when the operational concept of 2006 was suspended following the Second Lebanon War. One of the main objectives of the Operations Directorate in the period following the war was to update the operational concept. Apparently the General Staff work was not completed under Chief of Staff Ashkenazi due to the general trend in the IDF of “back to basics,” which characterized his term of office and was correct at the time (Finkel, 2018, pp. 122-142). This trend postponed changes of various kinds, some that developed under Ashkenazi, and others that were initiated by Gantz. The strategy document under Gantz formalized the knowledge that was developed in those years (2006-2012).

### **IDF Strategy under Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, August 2015/January 2018**

The *IDF Strategy* document issued by Chief of Staff Eisenkot in 2015 includes “the strategy for force employment...focusing on the common elements of the various operational arenas in which the conflict is against a sub-state enemy

(such as Hezbollah and Hamas organizations)” (*IDF Strategy*, 2015, p. 7). It was written for internal purposes, such as the General Staff framework for operational concepts to be developed by the regional commands that were deemed very important by Eisenkot, but was used in an unusual way compared to its predecessors for the purpose of an open dialogue with the political echelon. The reason for this novel use apparently lies in Eisenkot’s experience of the interface between the politicians and the military when he served as the Prime Minister’s Military Secretary and then as the head of Amatz in the Second Lebanon War. The Gideon multi-year plan, which was based on his strategy document, stressed the development of the IDF’s ability to act against Hamas and Hezbollah, although at the time of the publication of the strategy and the preparation of the Gideon Plan, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that the main threat to Israel was from Iran. A special report of the Knesset Sub-Committee on the Security Concept stated:

“Gideon” was designed “from the bottom up” by and within the IDF: and this was with no written, approved, and published national security concept, and for most if not all of the process, even without preliminary instruction from the political echelon. This could lead to a return of the failures from the previous campaigns, both in terms of a missing critical mass of real capabilities, and because of the danger that an army that was built and prepared for its mission with one rationale may be required to act according to another rationale. Meanwhile the congruence necessary in today’s operations between instructions from the political echelon and the willingness to implement them, and the operational plans and consequent force design, is

absent. (Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, 2017, p. 6)

Whatever the case, in view of the importance of the matter, Chief of Staff Eisenkot did everything in his power to encourage a professional dialogue between the military and the political echelon on this subject.

The process of knowledge development took the form of staff work coordinated by the head of Amatz, Maj. Gen. Yoav Har Even, and with the help of the Dado Center, and its content was influenced by two elements: an analysis of Operation Protective Edge (2014) and the personal learning process experienced by Eisenkot before he became Chief of Staff. The results were published in March 2015 (a month after he took office) in a document called “Core Messages to IDF Commanders,” which stated that there was “a need for a joint and thorough clarification of ‘IDF strategy and the operational concept,’ with a discussion of the basic ideas arising from it” (Office of the Chief of Staff, 2015). The General Staff discussed the outcomes of the work at a two-day workshop in late March 2015, and the decisions of the Chief of Staff guided the continuation of the work. The document was presented to Defense Minister Ya’alon in July 2015 (Har Even, 2020).

The main issues highlighted in this document were:

- a. *The focus on the “first circle”—Hezbollah and Hamas:* This focus is a change from previous documents, which defined the range of hostilities but did not define any order of priorities.
- b. *Within the first circle—focus on a war scenario:* The classified version of the document included quantitative aspects of the range of action of the ground forces and the scope of targets that the Air Force was required to attack (here too it differs from previous documents that were more general): “The ability to activate effective Operational-Level fire (air, land, and sea) is required in all war arenas, at full strength,

at any time, with an output of thousands of targets for a single day of fighting, and for the rest of the time—the ability to generate and attack hundreds of targets per day” (*IDF Strategy*, 2015, p. 40).

- c. *Engagement with the cyber domain*—broader in comparison with the document from the Gantz era, defining the need for “establishing a cyber arm which will serve as a principal command, subordinate to the Chief of the General Staff, for operations and force buildup of the IDF cyberspace capabilities. It will be in charge for planning and implementing the cyber domain campaign” (*IDF Strategy*, 2015, p. 42). The arm was not established, but there were a number of organizational processes in this area, including the establishment of the Cyber Defense Division in the C4I Directorate (which later became C4I and Cyber Defense Directorate).
- d. Following international reports of IDF actions in Gaza, the subject of the struggle over the legitimacy of IDF actions occupied a relatively large part of the document, with details of measures the IDF must use in order to maintain this legitimacy (*IDF Strategy*, 2015, pp. 29-30).

Following Eisenkot’s decision that the *IDF Strategy* required updating in view of developments, a new version was issued in January 2018. The updates were the product of staff work led by the head of the Training and Doctrine division, Brig. Gen. Motti Baruch, and were discussed by the head of Amatz, Maj. Gen. Nitzan Alon, and the Chief of Staff himself. In the foreword, the Chief of Staff wrote:

This document updates the *IDF Strategy* of 2015, in view of changes affecting several aspects. One concerns the way in which the IDF analyzes the strategic environment and threats. These were divided between the “complex of conflicts” that the IDF must confront, alongside the “complex

of cooperation” and coordination that the IDF develops. The second concerns force employment, and defines two main approaches—decision, and prevention and influence, based on the understanding that these approaches reflect ideas on how to deal with threats, and that there is reciprocity between them. Third, the document also expresses the growing importance of the campaign between wars (CBW) and of other efforts, such as the cyber and cognitive (information operations) efforts, in addition to the continued effort of reinforcing joint ground maneuver capability. (*IDF Strategy*, 2018, p. 3)

### Behind the IDF Strategy Documents: Reflections on the IDF

It appears that the various documents are not products of personal caprices by the respective Chiefs of Staff (i.e., a document intended is to leave the imprint of the new Chief of Staff by replacing his predecessor’s document, or to introduce his changes as soon as he enters office). Mofaz published the document at the end of his tenure; Ya’alon, who worked on developing the concept throughout his term of office, did not complete it and the document was published under his successor, Halutz; Ashkenazi did not publish a strategy document; Gantz published the document halfway through his term, while Eisenkot published two versions of the document during his term—a year after taking office and about a year before leaving.

Presumably the Chiefs of Staff felt a genuine need to explain to the IDF—a large and complex organization—a number of developing aspects: the conceptualization of enemies and conflicts; the reasons for organizational changes; directions in the central force design issues, and so on.

Second, in recent years, in addition to the IDF strategy documents, more and more operational concept documents have been written, serving

as the basis of war plans. Operational concepts also existed in the past, but most of them were a kind of shared understanding that was never put into writing. The IDF has become more formally established in institutional terms, and in recent years a concept document has almost become a condition for formulating and writing plans. This trend is similar to the increasing rate of updates to IDF strategy documents in the last two decades, and above all it shows that the IDF is a learning organization that invests considerable resources into updating its concepts.

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Additional reasons for the increasing engagement in writing concepts include various failures since the Yom Kippur War, leading to the understanding that devising plans without a concept is a fundamental lapse; conceptual confusion deriving from the increasing complexity of warfare (in the broadest sense, including CBW), and the rapid rate of change in the geopolitical environment, requiring renewed interpretation of the situation; imitation of the American attitude to the publication of official concept documents as a feature of a “serious” and well-ordered military organization (in terms of procedure, not content); and the need for an organizational “compass”—regulation of a shared world of terms, focus on new areas of importance to the Chief of Staff, and so on.

The conceptual confusion reflected in the strategy documents is directly linked to the rise in the complexity of warfare as perceived in the IDF. For many years, the pattern of waging war did not change in principle, and was based on fighting between a regular military force against the regular military forces of Arab countries.

Until the early 2000s, the IDF fought in a variety of less intense conflicts (the War of Attrition [1968-1970], the first intifada [1987-1991], and others) but these were not seen as related to the core of the IDF concept, which was fairly clear—take the fighting to the enemy’s territory by the use of overwhelming force as soon as possible, and defeat the enemy with air and armored warfare. In the eyes of IDF commanders, the relative stability of the threat and the response did not require any change to the fundamental (and unwritten) concept of the use of force. Since the second intifada (2000-2005, and as the threat of fighting between armies has faded) until today, the IDF has been occupied by different, less familiar threats, some very close to policing, others dealing with a semi-military enemy, and others in distant circles, and these trends are what have led to the complexity under discussion.

Under Mofaz the IDF had to deal with new areas, such as suicide terrorism operating within a broad-based popular uprising, and with threats from afar, while the IDF had recently solved the problem of dealing with the swarm of Syrian AFVs. Under Halutz, the IDF had already defeated suicide terrorism in the West Bank, withdrawn from Gaza, and tried to emulate the United States army that was victorious in the Iraq War (2003), but missed the main problem that it encountered just after publication of the strategy: the short-range rocket capabilities of Hezbollah and Hamas. This threat received very limited mention in the concept document, which focused on dealing with state armies and the Palestinians. In the days of Chief of Staff Gantz, the IDF had two operations in Gaza behind it (Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense), and the third, Protective Edge, took place after publication of the document. The IDF was uncomfortable with the results of these operations and tried to define them as “deterrence campaigns,” which under Eisenkot became “limited campaigns.” The political echelon shared this conceptual confusion, and it led to the phenomenon described by Michael (2016) in the context of

the war on jihadi terror in the context of civil-military relations. In the case of IDF strategy documents, the focus changed over the years from Palestinian terror organizations in the West Bank during the Mofaz era, to the semi-state terror organization Hezbollah in the Eisenkot era (or the “terror army,” according to the definition of Chief of Staff Kochavi, Lev Ram, 2019), but they also dealt with more distant circles, and here too there is confusion, and concept and achievements must be defined. This confusion illustrates the need for the “open discourse space” between the echelons within the army, and between them and the political echelon, and the documents analyzed here are part of that type of discourse that has developed in recent decades.

Another explanation for the quickening pace of updated IDF strategy documents is the slow rate of update of more official binding documents—General Staff Doctrine – Operations (the main doctrinal document in the IDF, which defines issues such as types of war, the organization of the fighting space—arenas, fronts, and so on, principles of processes of command and control, and so forth). It is unnecessary to specify the conceptualization of the conflicts in the IDF strategy documents (“the circles” in the time of Mofaz; the division into routine/emergency/war and the deterrent operations of Gantz; the limited campaigns and the campaign between the wars of Eisenkot), but rather in military doctrine documents, since these definitions are used by the IDF not only for conceptual guidance but also for planning needs and writing orders. However, in a reality in which this was not updated from the last version in 2006 until 2019 (when the updated General Staff Operations Doctrine was published), the IDF had no choice but to bridge the gap by means of the strategy documents.

The IDF strategy documents should generate new concepts if necessary, but these must be incorporated as an agreed update of the Operations doctrine. The strategy documents should make use of this conceptualization

in order to develop the principles of force design and employment (something that the Operations doctrine is not intended to include by virtue of its definition as a doctrine). For that purpose it will be necessary to continue updating the military doctrine at the level of the General Staff.

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**It is also important to note what is not included in the IDF strategy documents. Due to their focus on conceptualizing the threats and current modus operandi in the IDF, they do not deal with the medium-range and long-range future.**

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It is also important to note what is not included in the IDF strategy documents. Due to their focus on conceptualizing the threats and current modus operandi in the IDF, they do not deal with the medium-range and long-range future. Ever since the document published by Mofaz in 2002, the IDF strategy documents have not reflected concepts of the future battlefield, of the type found for example in the US Army, and therefore they have not driven significant change. They dealt largely with the present and the near future, and were therefore suitable for driving the size of the IDF in the course of the multi-year plan (closing/opening units) and matters of training and ammunition stocks, and for driving organizational changes (for example, in the strategy document of 2015—setting up the Commando Brigade, organizing the field of cyber, and so on), but not for longer ranges. The engagement of Chief of Staff Kochavi with the “Operational Concept for Victory,” which gives practical guidance (and not only in terms of quantity) for force design, reflects the important introduction of a new concept. It is still too early to analyze the implementation of the concept, although in terms of methodology it was based on the [design approach](#), and was led personally by the Chief of Staff. It is possible that the Operational Concept for Victory, if implemented, will resolve at least some of the conceptual confusion linked to the operations

in Gaza that is reflected in the most recent IDF strategy documents.

### The IDF Strategy Documents and their Role in the “Open Discourse Space”

The impact of these documents was mainly in regulating and introducing the latest concepts at the time to the IDF as a whole, and in this they were successful. With the security challenges growing more complex (see the confusion described above), this matter was extremely important, both to create a shared language within the IDF, and as the basis for developing new concepts. Since each document was published in a different context with different purposes, it is hard to compare them vis-à-vis long term force design. The 2002 Mofaz document describes changes already made during his tenure; the 2006 Ya’alon-Halutz document is unusual in the scope of the changes announced, although the Second Lebanon War led to a freeze of most of the elements, except for the integration that developed in the years after the war.

The connection imagined by the Winograd Commission between the document and the outcome of the Second Lebanon War was significantly greater than the actual one, since the document was published a few months before the war and considerable parts had not yet become IDF praxis. The idea of Effects-Based Operations was declared a mistake after the war, although in fact elements can be seen in the concepts that guided IDF action in operations following the Second Lebanon War; the strategy document of 2015 states that the commander of a campaign is the Chief of Staff and not the commander of the regional command; the design approach apparently disappeared after the war, although its necessity was understood and it returned as an official approach to the development of concepts at the end of the Gantz era and the start of the Eisenkot era.

The Gantz document of 2013 was similar to that of Mofaz. It was published toward the end

of his term as Chief of Staff and its contribution was to the regulation of terms rather than to force design (such as for operational depth).

Eisenkot’s document is the most focused, with the emphasis on the response to Hezbollah and Hamas, and in the directions for force design, most of which were implemented, such as extending the capability for attack by air fire, development of cyber capability, the Commando Brigade, and more.

In IDF culture, conceptual breakthroughs do not usually come from written documents, but through an interactive process between the idea and the operational and/or technological experience of implementing it (Adamsky, 2012, pp. 190-194). Sometimes it happens following a political instruction or understanding of a change in the external environment, but this should not be seen as evidence of a lack of conceptual innovation in the IDF, but as an organizational pattern that sees written documents as secondary to action. Writing the document usually marks the end of the process, and is not its catalyst. However, as in the strategy documents themselves, there have been changes in this area, as shown by the Operational Concept for Victory document from Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, which summarizes the stage of designing the concept before moving to planning and execution.

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## Note

- 1 Maj. Gen. (res.) Yoav Har Even served as head of the Operations Branch during the writing of the IDF Strategy documents 2013 and 2015, and before then, as assistant to Chief of Staff Ya’alon, and as Bureau Head for Chief of Staff Mofaz.