



### The General Staff: Management and Decision Making

Gal Perl Finkel

#### *The Israeli General Staff*

by Meir Finkel

Modan, Maarachot Publishing 2020

504 pages [in Hebrew]

At the outset of World War II, “the results of the German General Staff’s thinking and decision making on the battlefield outdid those of its French counterpart” (p. 11). This is what Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi wrote in the preface to a new book about the IDF General Staff by Brig. Gen. (ret.) Dr. Meir Finkel. Kochavi here underscores the importance of the General Staff and its ability to influence a campaign, in the present and in the future. Thus, he continued, “The General Staff must be a body that specializes in management and decision making for the immediate, short, medium, and long term, and especially in time of war, which is its greatest test. It requires training, knowledge, skill, teamwork and a critical attitude, and curiosity and creativity” (p. 11).

In this book, the author, formerly commander of an armored brigade and head of the Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies, continues his previous book, *The Chief of Staff*, and the effort to analyze thoroughly and fundamentally the roles and challenges of the General Staff, which is the IDF’s strategic

command that includes headquarters, military districts, and other functions, and to try to explain how it learns, plans, and functions.

The book includes four chapters of test cases. Each chapter concludes with a summary and the author’s recommendations, which are intended to help the IDF General Staff avoid the difficulties and errors presented in the chapter. In the fifth chapter the author presents his main insights and his recommendations for improving the work of the General Staff.

### Methodology

The book presents a comparative analysis of the General Staff’s performance with regard to four roles and challenges: the planning processes in the General Staff, including multi-year planning for force buildup, operational planning for wartime, and planning during wartime; various learning processes of the General Staff, including lessons learned from war, learning from foreign armies, and processes of change; patterns of organizing in the face of evolving challenges, including the establishment of new staff bodies and the direct management of the General Staff; and chiefs of staff coping with a General Staff that opposed the outlook and changes they sought to implement, and with differences of approach within the General Staff.

Although the study is not a historical documentary, it was based on material from the IDF’s History Department and on biographies, media publications, and interviews the author conducted with senior officers who served in the General Staff over the years. Although each period was marked by different challenges and contexts, there are similar characteristics that can instruct about the recurring challenges, responsibilities, and roles of the General Staff. At the same time, and as the author insisted, it is difficult to examine the periods comparatively, since each period entails its particular challenges and strategic context.

The book’s analysis is detailed and systematic and offers enlightening insights. For example, in the chapter describing operational planning

---

**An operational plan is designed to enable development of the required knowledge, to form the basis for a common language and the "compass" for force buildup...The nature of operational plans change when moving from plan to command in light of context. Therefore, the Chief of Staff emphasized that the plan is a means. The planning process, force buildup of the operational capabilities, and the readiness of the forces—those are the important things.**

---

(planning for war), which is the principal process that the General Staff executes in the field of force, the author outlines the main characteristics of the General Staff planning process, including the nature of the plan and its basic assumptions, the need for modular and flexible planning, and the creation of coordination and synchronization between the General Staff, the command, and the operational branch (p. 97). Despite this, the author notes the analysis of former chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot:

An operational plan is designed to enable development of the required knowledge, to form the basis for a common language and the “compass” for force buildup...The nature of operational plans change when moving from plan to command in light of context. Therefore, the Chief of Staff emphasized that the plan is a means. The planning process, force buildup of the operational capabilities, and the readiness of the forces—those are the important things. (p. 103)

Indeed, throughout the chapter the emphasis is on the need for mental flexibility, planning, force buildup, and formulated responses that can be adapted to a changing reality.

A particularly fascinating chapter describes how the General Staff learns during combat, including through friction with the enemy (pp. 219-234). An example is the learning process that

the General Staff conducted through the Central Command in the first year of the second intifada. The General Staff was faced with the dilemma of whether to continue defensive preparations or to transition to an offensive that included large-scale infiltration of forces into the heart of the refugee camps—a move that entailed possible achievements in the form of harming senior members of terrorist organizations and the destruction of weapons and ammunition, as well as considerable risk, since it included fighting in urban areas and in the heart of a civilian population.

The author quotes Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland, then-head of the Planning Directorate:

Those who led to the approval of the operations were the commanders of the infantry brigades. At that time, the IDF was blessed with four of the best brigade commanders it has ever had: Aviv Kochavi from the Paratroopers, Chico Tamir from Golani, Imad Fares from Givati, and Yair Golan from Nahal. The commanders, and especially Aviv and Chico, persuaded the commander of the Central Command, Itzik Eitan, and the chief of staff to approve the operations. The operational achievements of these raids were partial, but the fact that the operations were carried out with a minimum of casualties—among both the soldiers and the civilian population—gave the assurance that it would be possible, when necessary, to enter and take over West Bank cities. One or two months later, the time for this did come [as part of Operation Defensive Shield]. (p. 228)

Although this is a fascinating example, it might have been better to include in the book another test case that has not yet been thoroughly investigated, and to examine the learning process conducted by the General

Staff and the Southern Command in 2006-2008. The commander of the Gaza Division at the time, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Moshe “Chico” Tamir, a veteran of the Golani Brigade, initiated “constant friction” with the enemy through raids carried out by infantry and armored battalions, as well as elite units (interview with M. Tamir, March 22, 2020). These raids were necessary, according to then-Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, due to the need to “handle terrorist activity on the other side of the fence,” including frequent firing of Qassams on the city of Sderot and other localities. “We did not have an ‘Iron Dome,’ we did not have a good answer, and we had to take action against this thing, in order to restore security” (interview with G. Ashkenazi, February 21, 2021).

According to Tamir, these operations were preceded by “very orderly and very didactic preparation,” which built confidence in the ability of the forces to perform among the senior command levels that were required to approve them (interview with M. Tamir, March 22, 2020), among them Southern Command General Yoav Gallant, a veteran of Shayetet 13 (Lamm, 2008) and Chief of Staff Ashkenazi, who acknowledged their contribution since his days as a company commander in Golani “to the capabilities and self-confidence of the commanders” and their influence on the enemy (interview with G. Ashkenazi, February 21, 2021). Battalion commanders, including Yaron Finkelman from the Paratroopers (Harel, 2020) and David Zini from the Golani Brigade, then led raids across the fence in the Gaza Strip and struck terrorists in their territory (Pollak, 2015). These operations enabled the command, and through it the General Staff, to accumulate knowledge, analyze Hamas’s strengths and weaknesses, and prepare accordingly for Operation Cast Lead.

Although the author notes in the book that the Southern Command and its then-commander Gallant carried “a great deal of weight in determining how the ground forces operate during the operation” (p. 273), he

refrains from describing it in detail, as well as the process that preceded it—from the division to the command and to the General Staff. The successful result of the operation, Tamir stated, was “due to the combination of ground forces with air forces.” They identified targets, he said, maneuvered with confidence, and hit enemy operatives (interview with M. Tamir, March 22, 2020).

---

**Focusing on this level means a constant and systematic need for an up-to-date interpretation of reality, finding appropriate methodologies for developing a response to the new challenges, and establishing command and method mechanisms for IDF coordination and synchronization.**

---

## Insights

The central and first component of the General Staff’s uniqueness, Finkel states, “is the strategic level that it oversees. Focusing on this level means a constant and systematic need for an up-to-date interpretation of reality, finding appropriate methodologies for developing a response to the new challenges, and establishing command and method mechanisms for IDF coordination and synchronization” (p. 461).

Moreover, the fact that the General Staff interfaces with the political echelon requires it to adopt its language as well as the language of the military—and the world and considerations of the political echelon are different from those of the military. “Building and maintaining a common language with the political echelon, especially if it changes, is a task that requires a variety of methods, such as discussions, visits, joint war simulations, and more” (p. 462).

The author made a good selection of test cases that describe the roles and challenges before the General Staff, noting that he was required to balance a range of tensions—chiefly the desire for maximum relevance versus the desire to produce cohesion between ranks and synchronization of efforts. For example, he notes the decision of Chief of Staff Dan Halutz

during the Second Lebanon War to change the operational plan several times so as not to carry out an unsuitable plan. On the other hand, there is the attitude expressed by US General George Patton, considered one of the best generals in history, that “a good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week” (Hanson, 1999).

---

### **A decrease in the effectiveness of the IDF response could be catastrophic if war breaks out in the midst of updating the response.**

---

An additional tension is force buildup, as it is necessary to both preserve and improve the military's competence for the challenges of the present on the one hand, and to implement modern means and try to shape the army for the challenges of the next decade on the other. An example, Finkel notes, can be seen in the short story “Superiority” by Arthur C. Clarke, in which “an attempt to develop advanced capability led to a temporary decline in effectiveness in comparison with the possibility of improving the old means, and to a defeat at the hands of an enemy that rapidly mass-produced less advanced capabilities” (p. 463).

The author points out that a decrease in the effectiveness of the IDF response could be catastrophic if war breaks out in the midst of updating the response. This applies to operational outlooks and operational plans that have not yet been implemented, and to weapons and advanced technological systems as well. Therefore, he writes, force buildup must be “based on flexibility, especially organizational-technological flexibility that includes components of balance, redundancy, versatility, and the ability to change” (p. 464).

In the field of operational planning and in view of the fact that strategic context is changing rapidly, the author recommends the formulation of modular plans. Thus, in a limited campaign, Operation Cast Lead, for example, a plan that was originally intended to defeat the enemy fully

can be only partially realized, while maintaining its relevance.

### **Missing from the Book**

While an important and enlightening study, the book lacks up-to-date reference to the work of the General Staff vis-à-vis the political echelon, not only in the first three decades after the establishment of the state but in recent years, given Israel's new threats and current challenges.

In the last two years, for example, much evidence has been published about the dialogue between the General Staff, headed by Chief of Staff Eisenkot, and the political echelon before Operation Northern Shield, until late in 2018, at Eisenkot's initiative and with the approval of the political echelon, the IDF took surprise action and destroyed the Hezbollah tunnels on the Lebanese border (Farhi, 2020).

There is also a lack of reference in the book to the career path of the members of the General Staff and to the question of whether they were trained as necessary to act not only as commanders at the tactical level but also as commanders at the strategic level. In the IDF, most of the position holders (beginning at the rank of colonel) acquire the knowledge for their positions by on the job training, and the experience gained has enormous weight. Officers such as former Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yair Golan, who commanded a Paratroopers company and battalion in combat in Lebanon, and later a brigade and division, but also served in training positions and as head of the Operations section in the Operations Directorate; or Southern Command General Eliezer Toledano, who as an officer in the Paratroopers fought in the second intifada, commanded the elite Maglan unit in the 2006 war and raids in Gaza initiated by Brig. Gen. Tamir, and served as the Prime Minister's military secretary (and therefore a member of the General Staff)—these officers did indeed go through a complete and varied service track, during which they gained experience

both at the tactical and strategic levels. When the IDF designates commanders as having the potential for senior command, it is fitting that this approach constitute a guide for planning their career path.

## Conclusion

Meir Finkel's fascinating and comprehensive book is an important addition to an understanding of the role of the General Staff and its leader, its discourse with the political echelon, its responsibilities, the challenges it faces, processes, and role that have a tremendous impact on the entire country.

If in his previous book the author focused on the Chief of Staff, he has now made an in-depth analysis of the General Staff, which supports the Chief of Staff, learns, plans, and operates—in routine and in wartime—and of all of its various wings (planning, operational intelligence, logistics, and of course military districts).

In conclusion, it is worth recalling a statement by Gabi Ashkenazi while serving as deputy Chief of Staff, whereby the Chief of Staff is required to remember “the importance of the combatant

echelon. They not only pay for our mistakes, they also correct them. Therefore, even today with all the budgetary difficulties, the lesson I've learned is—strengthen the combatant echelon!” (Channel 1, 2008).

Gal Perl Finkel is a researcher on military and strategic affairs at INSS. There is no family connection between him and the author of the book, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Dr. Meir Finkel.

## References

- Channel 1. (2008, March 14). Panel of generals and the Minister of Defense on Judea and Samaria—2003—Part Six [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://bit.ly/32OaMAm> [in Hebrew].
- Farhi, A. (2021). Between the north and the south: The tension between the arenas in shaping Israel's national security policy—2017-2018 as a test case. *Maarachot*, 489, pp. 8-15.
- Hanson, V. D. (1999). *The soul of battle*. Anchor Books.
- Harel, A. (2020, October 2). Experience at a bargain price. *Haaretz* [in Hebrew].
- Lamm, A. (2008, March 21). Operation Yoav. *Yediot Ahronot* [in Hebrew].
- Pollak, M. (2015, September 13). Bold and tough: Meet the commander of the new commando brigade. *Makor Rishon* [in Hebrew].