Air Force Command

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The Air Force Headquarters: Designing the Force and Planning its Employment
by Meir Finkel
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The Air Force Headquarters: Designing the Force and Planning for its Employment by Brig. Gen. (res.) Dr. Meir Finkel is an important contribution to the field. While most of the literature covering the Israeli Air Force focuses on personal stories, its combat heritage, or an analysis of a particular event, Finkel's book provides a broad view of the Air Force's evolution in terms of force development, planning, and execution—and over the long term.

The book opens with a description of the unique cultural character of the Israeli Air Force Staff and touches on its interaction with the IDF General Staff. As such, Finkel completes the picture painted in his two previous books, covering the Israeli Chief of Staff and the IDF General Staff. This trilogy presents a full picture of how decisions are made in the IDF, particularly on how force is applied: decisions are taken by the Chief of Staff, with the help of his General Staff directorates—above all, Operations, Strategy, and Planning—and in conjunction with the operational domain experts, headed by the Air Force.

The book then reviews the main milestones in the development of the Israeli Air Force and changes along the way—from formulation of Operation Focus, the airstrike on Egyptian airfields that opened the Six Day War, through the challenge of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) in the Yom Kippur War and Operation Peace for Galilee, the transition from fighting regular military organizations to fighting sub-state organizations, establishment of the echelons of unmanned aircraft and air defense, and the transition to network-centric fighting, to the era of the Campaign between Wars (CBW) and international cooperation.

The author analyzes at length some of the tensions that have defined the operation of the Air Force both in the past and today; these, he feels, should concern the current Air Force leadership.

The book is issue-based and impartial, recognizes the complexity of matters, and does not seek to act as the Air Force's critic or advocate. For example, the road to the failure of dealing with the SAMs in the Yom Kippur War is not only analyzed with the wisdom of hindsight, but also from the perspective of the Staff that prepared the Air Force for war at that time. The author provides his readers with new insights and describes how components of the response prepared by the Israeli Air Force for the SAMs threat were successfully applied, even if only partially, at later stages of the Yom Kippur War. For example, the combined operation of UAVs, chaff (a method for disrupting or distracting radar), massive electronic warfare

(EW), and "fist" missiles (which home in on the radiation of air defense radar) on October 22, 1973, led to the destruction of five SAM batteries, without the loss of a single aircraft (p. 108). This review leaves an open question: were the plans prepared by the Air Force Staff capable of yielding a more successful result if the events of October 6, 1973 had been managed in a more orderly, consistent way, without the frequent changes of prioritizing theaters and missions.

The author analyzes at length some of the tensions that have defined the operation of the Air Force both in the past and today; these, he feels, should concern the current Air Force leadership. The first tension is between the necessity to prepare for war in advance and the need to adjust to the changing and sometimes unforeseen circumstances of the actual war. One of the keys to the success of the Israeli Air Force lies in its preparations in the years before the war: defining the future challenge correctly, developing a suitable concept to overcome the challenge, developing a doctrine and TTP (tactics, techniques, procedures), developing weapon systems, and of course, requiring years of training. The need for prior preparation becomes even more acute in an era when the Israeli Air Force is expected to attack thousands of targets on each day of warfighting, since the Air Force Staff is unable to "generate" this number of targets in real time, and both the size and quality of the target lists prepared before the war are critical to the success of force application in combat.

But this also involves many risks, and it is possible that the working assumptions of the contingency plan will not materialize: war may turn out differently from the plan. There is a risk of misunderstanding the future challenge or the difficulty of implementing a preconceived plan due to the context or the unique constraints of the war that ultimately breaks out. For example, the author quotes a statement by former Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. (res.) Amir Eshel regarding a future war with Hezbollah: "Houses where civilians live will be damaged, and the extent will be enormous" (pp. 212-213). But as in the case of the preemptive strike in the Yom Kippur War (p. 92), political constraints may make this impossible.

The author also discusses the claim that the enemy's actual "phase transitions" (changes from routine to emergency deployments) may be different from what has been presumed by the plan, and that the enemy's process of moving from routine to emergency posturing may lead to inefficient utilization of the plan. These risks obligate the Air Force Staff to keep an open mind when defining any future challenge, to invite criticisms of its perceptions, and to encourage the creation of a "red team"[1] and reassessment forums. Similarly, in the event of escalation that could lead to war, the Air Force Staff must be attentive to the distinct circumstances and identify in real time gaps between the assumptions of the plan and the emerging context.

The second tension described by Finkel is between the Air Force's proficiency in "tactical inputs" and its simultaneous ambition to be proficient in "strategic outputs." The author adequately describes the Israeli Air Force as a pragmatic organization in which the headquarters are "close" to the field, and which excels in techno-tactics. Thus Finkel claims that a robust opening strike such as Operation Focus has become the ethos of the Israeli Air Force, which seeks to execute such a strike in every conflict. This means that Air Force planning is concentrated on the tactical level and the opening phase.

On the other hand, the author shows how the success of the air campaign in the war in Kosovo (Operation Allied Force), the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), and the leap in possible achievements as a result of the entry of precision air-launched fire, along with accepting responsibility for some of the sub-campaigns in the framework of the CBW, aroused the ambition that the Air Force would be more than a mere "blasting contractor." This tension is not resolved, and it is expressed

inter alia in the dissonance described by Finkel at the end of the Second Lebanon War, when the Air Force was "victorious" while the IDF emerged "battered" (pp. 48-49). Indeed, the Israeli Air Force has emerged content from most of the recent campaigns, since the execution of the tactical air plan was excellent. That said, discussion about the low strategic output of that same plan has been sidestepped. To a certain extent, the IDF General Staff encourages this dissonance, since in limited warfare the IDF General Staff acts as a kind of de facto campaign commander and tends to speak with the Air Force in the language of target lists. New IT systems also create the mistaken impression that it is possible to manage fire from the IDF General Staff. Therefore, the Air Force tends to examine its own performance in the same terms—did the munition hit the target on the TOT[2] and with a suitable fuse—instead of with the language of strategic output. The attack on Hamas's combat tunnels in Operation Guardian of the Walls is only the latest example.

This is also clear in the CBW, where the author describes the tactical excellence of the Israeli Air Force, its agility, the fast pace, and operation at times in the heart of the dense Syrian integrated air defense system. Yet in the test of strategic output, Hezbollah ultimately succeeded in acquiring at least some of the capabilities that the CBW was intended to deny it, for example, development of echelons of precision weapons and of SAMs. If the Israeli Air Force wishes to excel not only in the test of tactical input but also in the test of strategic output, it must strengthen its campaign planning and management capabilities so as to bridge between these two tests, and insist with the IDF's Chief of Staff on the existence of a campaign planning level in the Air Force. The target lists composed by the IDF General Staff are not the best way for the application of airpower, and the Air Force Staff needs to carry out its own planning work that will ensure coherence between the strategic objective, the cost of the war approved by the decision maker, and the air campaign plan. The Air Force is not supposed to be concerned only by the tactical question of "how" to do it, but also by the campaign-level question of "what" to do.

The third tension described by Finkel is between the offensive ethos of the Air Force and the addition of the defense component to Israel's security concept, as expressed by the increasing importance of the air defense echelon. From the outset, the Air Force did not want SAMs against either aircraft or rockets and supported an offensive and versatile response to these threats. Finkel describes how the Air Force against its will was obligated to accept the Hawk missiles, the Arrow, the Patriot, and the Iron Dome, while being concerned with its budget for acquiring offensive weapons and with the standing of its offensive doctrine. But ultimately, the Air Force Staff recognized the value and necessity of the air defense echelon and even prioritized it in the allocation of human and financial resources.

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However, the continued development of the threat demands further development of air defense systems. The acquisition by Hezbollah and Iran of precision weapons significantly raises the threat to Israel, could also threaten the functional continuity of the IDF and the civilian hinterland, and lead to billions of dollars of damages. The acquisition by Hezbollah and Iran of cruise missiles and offensive UAVs diversifies the profile of the threat to Israel—these weapons may penetrate Israeli airspace at low altitude and from any direction. As in the case of the SA-6 before the Yom Kippur War and the short-range rockets before the Second Lebanon War, both surveyed in the book, there is a risk of recognizing the threat of precision weapons and cruise missiles in technical terms, while failing to internalize their campaign-level and strategic significance. Indeed, the development of the

threat makes it essential to continue developing an integrated air defense response, and in order to avoid any surprises, this response must also be available in routine times.

Finkel's book offers a new and broad contribution to understanding the Israeli Air Force. Books like *A War of its Own* (Bar-Yosef, 2021) analyze a single event at one point in time, based on partial information and insights. But it is very difficult to understand an event like the Yom Kippur War, the subject of Bar-Yosef's book, without the perspective of the organizational culture, the conceptual development over the decades prior to the war, force development over many years, war plans, and the dynamics with the IDF General Staff, and in all these matters Finkel's book makes a singular contribution.

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References

Bar-Yosef, U. (2021). *A war of its own: The air force in the Yom Kippur War*. Kinneret Zmora-Bitan.

Notes

1 A team that is not involved in drafting the plan, whose purpose is to examine the plan's stated and implied underlying assumptions and uncover internal contradictions and faulty planning.

2 Time over target, the time in which the attack is planned to be carried out.