Women's Combat Service in the IDF: The Stalled Revolution

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In September 2017, for the first time in American history, a woman completed the United States Marines Infantry Officer Course. This is one of the most demanding and challenging courses in the US military, and until now was the preserve of men. This achievement is part of a growing but gradual process of women integrating into combat positions in the American military, which reached a new height with the integration of women into the combat units. Since 2001, over 300,000 female US soldiers have been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan on military missions. Some of these women served in combat positions while others performed other tasks, but all served shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts in combat regions. Some have also paid with their lives: by late 2017, 166 female soldiers had been killed in action and over 1,000 wounded. More generally, since 2015, 640 American women have been assigned to combat tasks that were previously closed to them, in the artillery, the ordnance corps, and the navy.[1]

The integration of women into combat units and positions in Western militaries has become more common over the last two decades. The militaries of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway embraced a policy of full equality in the 1980s, and various processes led to a situation where today all positions are open to women in the militaries of Canada, Britain, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands (apart from the Marines).[2]

In the Israeli context, women have served in the IDF since its inception, some even as fighters and pilots. Their equal integration is mentioned in every comparative study as a shining example of equal opportunity for women

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in militaries. In fact, however, there was always occupation segregation inside the organization, and women served primarily in combat support units, in jobs perceived as "feminine," and in civilian front units. Since the end of the 1990s there have been changes in women's service after most jobs were opened to them and efforts were made to integrate them in combat positions. Two decades later, this article examines where women's service in the IDF stands today. Have the efforts to integrate women borne fruit? Is the revolution in gender equality in the Israeli military complete?

Civil-Military Relations in Israel, and the IDF as the Arena for a Social Struggle

Seventy years since the establishment of the State of Israel, unlike most Western militaries, the IDF remains, notwithstanding many changes, "a people's army," a public institution with a unique status in Israeli society. In spite of growing criticism since the 1970s regarding various aspects of the IDF's performance,[3] criticism referring mainly to its role as a public institution (for example its efficiency, budget management, and personnel management), the IDF remains the most highly esteemed public institution among the Israeli (Jewish) public – more than other institutions such as the police, the judicial system, the government, and the Knesset. The Israeli public continues to express a consistently high level of support for the various aspects of the IDF's performance as a fighting organization.[4]

As "the people's army," with its unique status among the Israeli public, the IDF has become an arena for struggles between various groups in Israeli society. In fact, there is no other organization in Israel that provides a platform for these types of social struggles. This unique status is expressed in a series of struggles waged since the 1980s by various groups using the IDF in an attempt to promote their specific beliefs, values, and rights. There are numerous examples: the struggle of the reservists' movements over pay, recognition, and prestige in Israeli society; the political struggle by left wing movements (such as Breaking the Silence, New Profile) against IDF activity in the territories; bereaved parents' movements; organizations that wish to promote tolerance of LGBTQ soldiers; the struggle of feminist movements for gender equality and honorable military service for women; and more.[5]

Women in the IDF and the Struggle for Equality

Until 1987, restrictions on the service of women in the IDF were defined in laws and regulations governing the security service, primarily in terms of positions that were closed to women. In 1987, this item was removed from the law, but no objectives for women's integration were defined. In 1995 a petition was filed in the Supreme Court by a young woman named Alice Miller, with the assistance of the Citizens' Rights Association and the Israel Women's Network (IWN), for acceptance to the IDF pilots course. In their precedent setting ruling, the Supreme Court judges decided that there was no justification for the distinction between women and men or for preventing women from applying to the course. This decision marked an achievement in legal and ethical statements regarding the right to gender equality in the military. Following the Supreme Court decision, a change in the Security Service Law came into effect in January 2000, stating that "a woman may perform any job in the IDF, including combat jobs, and benefit from equal rights after her discharge."

In the two decades that have passed since the Alice Miller High Court ruling, the issue of women's equality has attracted much public attention in the discourse on and between the IDF and Israeli society. In addition, the IDF has since become the arena for the struggle between two main groups regarding women's military service. On one side, liberal forces represented by secular groups, public figures, and movements for human and women's rights call for full gender equality in the IDF. On the other side, religious leaders (religious Zionist rabbis as well as ultra-Orthodox rabbis) and others from these sectors who oppose women's service demand gender segregation, and struggle against women's integration in combat units. The struggle between the liberal forces and the religious leadership centers on two main topics: equal service for women (today the main focus is on women serving in combat units); and regulating the service of women alongside religious soldiers.

During this period several changes occurred that improved the status of women in the IDF. It appeared that the changes in the Security Service Law and the processes that followed changed the face of the IDF and significantly increased the options open to women for more varied and equal service. Many jobs that had been reserved for men were opened to women, including the prestigious courses for pilots and naval officers, combat jobs in the artillery corps, the anti-aircraft units, and the Border Guard, training and rescue positions, and more. The percentage of positions

open to women rose from 55 percent in the 1980s to 92 percent today; the Women's Corps was abolished and replaced by a limited HQ branch in charge of promoting the integration and equality of women (the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff); military training that was separated by gender was combined; more attention was paid to the prevention of sexual harassment in the army; and more.[6]

There was also a significant change in combat service. According to IDF data, over a fifteen-year period the number of women serving as combat soldiers rose six-fold, from 435 in 2005 to 2,700 in 2017. Women are now integrated into the light infantry, the Border Guards, the search and rescue units of the Home Front Command, air defense, the Navy diving and towing units, electronic warfare, and the field intelligence corps. In 2017 the fourth mixed light infantry combat battalion was established, as well as a special training base for light infantry units.

The change did not occur overnight, and the integration of women into combat units encountered many difficulties. The military authorities dealt with some of them, while others are still being studied or processed. During this process, the IDF conducted medical-physiological studies to examine the effect of physical strain on women. Commanders and doctors were briefed in order to prevent women's injuries, training and strength scales and nutritional components were adapted for women's bodies, personal equipment and weapons were adapted, building infrastructures were reviewed, adjustments were made in the screening process, and a preparatory course before basic training was opened.[7]

Another change in women's service arrived from an unexpected direction. Young religious Zionist women, who until a few years ago did not enlist in the military, gradually choose to enlist: out of a potential 8,000 women each year, there were 935 religious female recruits in 2010. Within seven years this number tripled (to reach 2,700 in 2017). This change occurs to the dissatisfaction of some rabbis who are fighting against it, for example, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, who ruled against women enlisting in the IDF.[8] The growing number of female recruits represents a quiet movement of change coming from the women themselves, with the support of parents and educators, as well as associations such as Aluma and post high school preparatory programs ("mechinot") for religious young women that accompany them through the enlistment process and their service to help them maintain their religious way of life.

The Joint Service Order as a Field of Battle

Along with these achievements, it appears that the negotiation among social groups in Israeli society over women's military service is in constant process, in which any achievement that may enhance the gender equality is perceived as a threat to male religious soldiers.

Negotiations within the military take place through ongoing revisions of the Joint Service Order, whose purpose is to regulate relations between female soldiers and male religious soldiers. This order was first published in 2003, to provide a response for male religious soldiers and protect their rights. The order allows religious soldiers to avoid joint activity with women: if they are serving in mixed combat units they can be assigned to all male units; they can ask not to serve alongside women in training courses; there is an obligation to provide separate sleeping facilities, bathrooms, and showers; and there is an obligation to offer separate times for physical activity. In 2011 the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff, Brig. Gen. Gila Kalifi-Amir, claimed that the way this order was actually implemented led to a double loss: women were restricted in their movements and in their ability to function effectively, and the rules of proper integration were interpreted so strictly that they were impossible to implement and in effect impose religious extremism.[9]

The clauses of the order have been revised several times since, following pressure on the military by representatives of various social groups. The very fact of such frequent changes shows the intensity of the struggle. Dr. Yofi Tirosh claims that the Joint Service Order reveals an obsession with separate living quarters, the height of the canvas barrier between tents, and blocking the line of sight between men and women soldiers. The central characters are the women, who are perceived as "a potential attack on modesty," in a discussion where they are present but absent. For example, if their appearance is perceived as "immodest," a male religious soldier can ask not to serve alongside them or not to receive training from them.[10]

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Policing of relations between religious servicemen and women, as expressed in the negotiations over this order, was given an extra dimension some ten years ago with the start of recruitment of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) soldiers on the special Shahar

track (which is in addition to the separate combat Nahal Haredi track). These tracks offer non-combat service for Haredi soldiers (most of whom are married with children) in professional roles. The Shahar project began in the Air Force and spread to the Intelligence Corps, the Technology Division, the Navy, and other branches. To encourage it, the IDF undertook to offer the Haredi recruits a service that is "freed" from women. In other words, the military units and areas where Haredi soldiers served were "purified" of women.

Over the last year, the struggle against women's service in combat roles was led publicly by Brothers in Arms, an organization established in early 2017 that launched a campaign with the slogan: "Save the IDF, stop the joint service."[11] The organization has an array of volunteers who run a media campaign to promote their battle against women's service. The prism through which they view women in the context of integration into combat units casts women as a weak object needing protection, with the potential of seducing men while being "ruined" themselves.[12]

The main argument they have raised is the physiological argument, which has a seemingly "objective" reason, defined as "injury discourse." They claim that the hypersensitivity of women soldiers during training and while serving in combat roles leads to injuries that affect their health. In fact, this subject was studied in depth by the IDF, which is when the scales of effort and strength, nutrition, and other means were adjusted to the female body.[13] Other arguments raised by opponents of women's service (which present nothing new) relate to women's exposure to the scenes of war, to being the cause of inappropriate behavior, to lowering the operational threshold, and more.

The Brothers in Arms campaign reflects the threat posed by joint service in combat units as seen by religious Zionist rabbis. The threat is so great that it has led rabbis from the national Haredi camp, the conservative wing of religious Zionism, and the liberal wing to join forces. In March 2017, they each separately published a letter calling on pupils not to enlist in combat units where men and women serve together.[14] This move reflects a moment of unity between the different streams of religious Zionism, which are often engaged in culture wars among themselves on religious, public, and political issues.[15] Such unity was driven by their shared concern over secularization and the tendency among young religious men and women who join the military to leave the religious fold, a fear grounded in the perception of secularism as excessive permissiveness.[16]

The liberal side of the struggle formerly consisted largely of feminist movements, although today their voice is heard little in the public discourse. The Israeli feminist movements have relatively few resources and little political power; it seems that they have wearied of the Sisyphean effort to promote women's service and have decided to channel their resources elsewhere. As of today, the sole organization leading this ongoing struggle appears to be the Israel Women's Network, which consistently comments on this subject on social networks and in the media. Unlike the Religious Zionism leadership, the feminist movements are not led by officers in the reserves who move freely around the offices of the Chief of Staff and the Human Resources Directorate of the General Staff, nor do they have an agenda of introducing cultural or political changes to the IDF beyond their request for gender equality.[17] The feminist movements mostly act by responding to incidents of discrimination and women's exclusion in the military.

In November 2017, the liberal camp received support in the form of a letter submitted to the Minister of Defense by a group of religious and secular officers from combat units, calling for support for women in combat service. Similar voices were heard from former and current IDF commanders. For example, at a session dealing with women's military service at the 2017 Herzliya Conference, Brig. Gen. (res.) Oren Abman said, "The IDF does not know, is unwilling and unable to manage without significant service by women…Women provide enormous quality…After all, not all men can be Egoz fighters." However, in terms of the balance of forces, it appears that apart from a few localized efforts, the field of battle for women's IDF service has been almost abandoned by the liberal (both secular and religious) part of the Israeli public.

The Forces Hindering the Integration of Women in Combat Units

While the revolution regarding women's IDF service that began in the 1990s can claim several achievements, at present the forces hindering change are more prominent. We examine and describe these central processes below.

One of the most prominent processes taking place in Israeli society in recent years is the rise in the dominance of the religious camp in Israeli society and politics. This process is expressed in the growing power of religious parties (Jewish Home, Shas, United Torah Judaism) in the present government,[18] who use their political strength to shape the character of the country according to their world view. This process, called "religionization,"

is reflected in the attempt to impose on the secular public a school curriculum with religious content; the entry of religious associations into state secular schools; and the insertion of religious elements into national ceremonies. Some have claimed that a gradual process has turned Israel into a country controlled by a religious minority, and that this minority has so much influence on Israeli politics that it is able to impose its wishes on the majority.[19]

Another factor working against the full integration of women in the military is the demographic change among combat officers. Since the early years of this century, due to various processes and with the support of religious Zionist rabbis, the proportion of graduates of national religious education enlisting in combat units in general, and in command tracks in particular, has increased. The exact numbers today are not known, but from 2001 to 2008 the proportion of religious officers in combat units is more than double the percentage of religious soldiers (22-31 percent of combat soldiers in Infantry Supplement Courses were religious, depending on the year). This process changes the social composition of the military from within, which in turn brings traditional perceptions of femininity and norms of inequality to the military culture. Joining these processes is Haredi recruitment, which began with the establishment of the first Haredi battalion, Netzah Yehuda, and has spread significantly with the opening of the Shahar tracks. Closely linked to these processes is the strengthening of religious elements within the military, which are reflected in growing cultural-religious influence on the nature and function of the IDF. A book describing these processes refers inter alia to the relatively new phenomenon of refusal to evacuate settlements on religious grounds,[20] competition between rabbinical and military authority, increasing power of the Military Rabbinate and the intervention of rabbis in routine and combat matters, encouragement of rabbis to their students to occupy positions of command in the security establishment, the harm and exclusion of women in the army under the Joint Service Order, and more. Some even claim that the IDF is undergoing processes of theocratization, expressed by the gradual penetration of religious authority into the IDF, in the attempt to influence areas of conduct that should normally be under the military's control.[21] Be this religionization, or the return of conservative attitudes, or processes of theocratization, there is no doubt that the military is dealing with a challenging reality vis-a-vis the need to balance between various social groups serving in its framework, and women are the ones who pay the price.

The processes described above create hidden and overt pressures on the military system to exclude women and reduce their integration in the IDF.[22]

Women's Service in the IDF: A "Stalled Revolution"?

Where is women's IDF service now? Is the process of change advancing toward equality or is the evolution stalled?[23]

In spite of the many changes for the better that have occurred in the IDF, improving enlistment, screening, and assignment processes for women and opening a whole range of roles to them, and the importance of these changes in promoting the revolution for women's equality, the core of combat service is currently beyond women's reach. The proportion of combat soldiers among all women serving in the IDF is still marginal, about 6 percent.[24] Women have been integrated into a variety of roles because the military recognizes their large and high quality potential, but at the same time this integration is limited in quantity and in terms of their assigned units.[25] Even changes that were hailed as significant advances such as the opening of the pilots course to women have not brought the desired outcomes (of 36 trainees who completed the last pilots course in December 2017, only one was a woman).

It appears that the positive changes that were already implemented in the IDF have been blocked by a series of recent decisions by senior IDF officials. For example, in October 2017 the IDF announced its intention to "stop the trend of combat service by women in order to conduct a series of tests."[26] This announcement came against a background of an (expected) increase of 200 women soldiers in 2017 serving in combat duties, where the total number of women fighters that year reached 2,700. Without pressure from the religious lobby, it is difficult to understand why the IDF rushed to block more female combat soldiers while their proportion among all combat soldiers is still marginal. The IDF's explanation for the decision was: "The IDF wishes to freeze the current situation and at this stage will not increase the quotas (of female combat fighters) in order to reexamine the effects of such service on young women."[27] This explanation shows that at this stage the opposition forces have succeeded

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in blocking the expansion of female combat positions due to the threat it poses to religious men.

Another recent IDF decision that harms the status of female fighters is the decision to reclassify IDF units based on their involvement in life threatening situations in combat. According to the new rating system approved by the Chief of Staff in September 2017, at the top of the pyramid will be the Advance Guard, or "sharp" units. A "sharp" soldier is defined as a soldier trained for combat action that involves risking his life to strike the enemy. The "sharp" units include Special Units, HQ Units, and Shaldag Unit, but also combat soldiers in infantry brigades: paratroops, Golani, Nachal, Givati, Kfir, and the Armored Corps and Artillery.[28] Women have no foothold in these units (except for current attempts to integrate women into the Armored Corps). Men and women fighters in the Caracal Battalion and Home Guard, which are part of the border defense array and where most combat women serve, have secondary status and are not part of the "sharp" units.[29]

This rating affects not only symbolic rewards for the soldiers but also their actual pay and benefits during and after their military service,[30] and it is another layer that hinders efforts to achieve equality for women in the military by giving secondary status to jobs where women are integrated.

A recent decision made by the Chief of Staff in the framework of the ongoing struggle over the Joint Service Order concerns a new update in the order's wording. After continuous pressure from the religious lobby, in December 2017 the Chief of Staff decided on a number of changes, including deleting the clause requiring implementation of the order "as far as possible, not by separating men and women soldiers." This deletion could encourage solutions that include separation and discrimination against women.

These recent IDF decisions are part of what we define the "stalled revolution." While the integration of women into combat units is already marginal, the decisions mentioned above indicate a halt to the process of change, blocking progress in the revolution. This means a halt to the (new) efforts to integrate women into combat units.

Conclusion and Future Implications

Although the IDF has embarked on important changes with the aim of integrating women into all military jobs, including combat positions, it appears that the IDF has turned from a site of breaking the "glass ceiling"

into a site where heavy pressure is being exerted to stop the revolution – to keep women away from the heart of military activity. The forces blocking the revolution are grounded in processes taking place in Israeli society and politics, in the demographic change in the composition of combat units, and in the strengthening of religious foundations within the military. They are reflected in a series of recent IDF decisions that hinder or reverse changes. The proportion of women combat soldiers remains small, and moves toward equality for women often encounter fierce opposition from religious quarters. The current situation was well described by Yofi Tirosh, who claims that "wherever rules are formulated with the whole purpose of maintaining modesty and protecting men from proximity to women, the women become more and more a potential threat to modesty."[31]

For David Ben-Gurion, the uniqueness and the unity of the IDF were vital for its moral strength and its ability to prevail in war. For that reason, in a move aimed at de-politicization of the IDF, Ben-Gurion worked to establish a national military that would unite all the armed forces and eliminate any ties to a political party or ideological movement. In view of this, Ben-Gurion was opposed to links between the Military Rabbinate and the religious parties on matters relating to religious observance in the army; he opposed the establishment of a separate religious corps and any kind of special treatment that would encourage separation and widen the rift between secular and religious, leading to two armies and two levels of command.[32]

The processes described in this article indicate that contrary to the vision of Ben-Gurion, there are signs of a worrying trend in which the IDF, in the name of acting as "the people's army," is becoming sectorial, segmented, and discriminatory. Religious and ultra-Orthodox groups are creating separate islands within the IDF, free of women, and consequently threatening its national character, the value of equality for all, and the essence of the IDF as a shared framework for all elements, genders, and groups in Israeli society.

Notes

1 "Women in Ground Combat: Facts and Figures," WIIS Women in International Security, 2017.

2 According to the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff, as presented to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in an open discussion on January 30, 2016.

3 Stuart Cohen, "The IDF and Israeli Society: A Re-examination," *Studies in Middle Eastern Security* 46 (2001).
4 Tamar Hermann et al., "Israeli Democracy Index 2017," Israel Democracy Institute, 2017. See also Roni Tiargan and Meytal Eran-Jona, "The Israeli Public's Perceptions towards the IDF: Stability and Change," *Armed Forces and Society* 42, no. 2 (2016): 324-43.
5 See for example G. Doron and Udi Lebel, *Politics of Bereavement* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2005); M. Laron, "Dear Families: The Struggle of Bereaved Families to Change the Method of Recompense in Israel," Shine Center for Social Science Research, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003.
6 N. Moshe, "Women's Service in the IDF," Knesset Center for Information and Research, 2013.
7 Ibid. Data from the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff.
8 "Rabbi Shlomo Aviner: Religious Girls are Bringing the IDF to Destruction," *Srugim*, March 9, 2017, http://bit.ly/2BSgUcs; Yaniv Kobowitz, "The IDF is Preparing for a Surge in Religious Female Recruits," *Haaretz*, December 26, 2017.
9 Gila Kalifi-Amir, "Proper Gender Assimilation," *Maarachot* 436 (April 2011): 28-35.
10 Yofi Tirosh, "Koby Niv's Position is Detached and Purist," *Haaretz*, March 20, 2017, https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/.premium-1.3937059.
11 See the Brothers in Arms website at https://ahimlaneshek.org/.
12 "Rabbi Levenstein: "They've Driven our Girls Mad," *Arutz Sheva*, March 7, 2017, https://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/341636.
13 Data from the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff.
14 See for example Yedidya Ben Or, "The Integration of Men and Women Harms the Cohesion of the IDF," *Arutz Sheva*, March 27, 2017, https://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/343052; "Mothers' Letter: Eisenkot – Cancel the Joint Service Order," *Srugim*, April 2, 2017, http://bit.ly/2COYIzN.
15 Yair Ettinger, "In the Dispute over Joint Service, Liberman and Eisenkot are Helping the Conservatives," *Haaretz*, March 16, 2017.
16 Yagil Levy, *The Supreme God-Commander: The Theocratization of the Army in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2015).
17 Levy, *The Supreme God-Commander: The Theocratization of the Army in Israel*.
18 For purposes of comparison, in the previous government, not one of the Haredi factions – Shas or United Torah Judaism – was in the coalition. Moreover, the Ministries of Justice, Education, and Interior (three influential ministries) are now all under the control of religious parties, which has never happened before.
19 Karin Carmit Yefet, "Synagogue and State in Israeli Military: A Story of 'Inappropriate Integration,'" *Law & Ethics of Human Rights* 223 (2016).
20 For example, the idea of refusing to evacuate settlements first emerged when the disengagement plan was adopted by the Knesset and the government. In February 2005, the Yesha Council rabbis announced that it is absolutely

forbidden to evacuate settlements. A document from the IDF Military Advocate General Corps states that before and during implementation of the plan, there were 163 cases of refusal or threats of refusal by soldiers in regular service, in the standing army, and in the reserves. See "Limits of Obedience and Refusing Military Orders," Knesset Research and Information Center, January 19, 2010, https://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/data/pdf/m02408.pdf.

21 Levy, *The Supreme God-Commander: The Theocratization of the Army in Israel*.

22 C. Heber and Pnina Sharvit Baruch, *Women's Service in the IDF: Continued Advance or Retreat?* (Institute for National Security Studies and Israel Democracy Institute, 2013).

23 The expression "stalled revolution" is taken from Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989).

24 Data from the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff. We could not find the corresponding data for men, as they are presumably censored. Estimates put the proportion of regular soldiers in combat roles at about 30 percent.

25 Zeev Lehrer, "Alice in Wonderland: The Politics of Religion and Gender since the Alice Miller Supreme Court Case," lecture given at an Open University seminar, "Between Pink and Orange: Religion and Gender in the Army," November 11, 2009.

26 Nir Dvori, "The IDF is Freezing the Increase in Combat Female Soldiers," November 1, 2017, *Channel 2*, *Mako News*.

27 Dvori, "The IDF is Freezing the Increase in Combat Female Soldiers."

28 Yossi Yehoshua, "Response Attack: The IDF in a Battle Revolution," *Yediot Ahronot*, September 14, 2017.

29 Amir Buhbut, "The Reform in Combat Soldiers' Status: Golani and Givati Inside, Caracal and Home Front Outside," *Ynet,* September 14, 2017.

30 Yehoshua, "Response Attack: "The IDF in a Battle Revolution."

31 Tirosh, "Koby Niv's Position is Detached and Purist." See also Michal Pailan, "Modesty Roll Call in the IDF: Female Soldiers Testify," *Mako*, September 27, 2017.

32 Z. Ostfeld, *An Army is Born: The Main Stages in Building the Army under the Leadership of David Ben-Gurion* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing, 1994), pp. 599-752.