



Should Israel Embrace Anew the Doctrine of Preventive War?

Israel is engaged in warfare against Hamas – a terror organization that openly declares its desire to bring upon the destruction of Israel, and who does not seem to be willing to end the fighting. Israel will have to ask itself whether its military doctrine suits the challenges and threats Israel is facing

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In mid-December 1955, the IDF launched a relatively large-scale operation against the Syrian forces in the Golan Heights. This operation became known as Operation Kinneret. From a military perspective, this operation achieved its goals. However, shortly after the operations ended, sharp criticism of the operation began to be heard. The critics claimed that no Syrian provocation preceded the operation. Therefore there did not seem to be any justification for such a large scale Israeli operation.

In response to this criticism, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan presented the doctrine of Preventive War. According to this doctrine, when a state is threatened by an enemy wishing its destruction, the threatened state does not have to wait for an act of provocation in order to have justification to attack the threatening state. In an attempt to make their case more clear, they gave the following tangible example: a snake comes into your house and curls up by the door. It appears to be in a deep coma. You do not know when it will wake up. Does that mean you have to leave him alone and go to sleep? Certainly not. You need to hit him even when he is not hurting you. You are the one who will choose the time and place to attack it.

A year later, in October 1956, in part due to fears of a massive military buildup in Egypt following the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, Israel launched Operation Kadesh (The Sinai Campaign). This operation was defined as a "classic" example of Preventive War. In this case, too, the question raised was whether the Israeli military operation was justified. Here again it was claimed that no significant Egyptian provocation preceded the Israeli operation. Ben-Gurion and Dayan explained that the Egyptian military buildup of weapons threatened to put Egypt in a position of superiority over Israel within a few years. Therefore, Israel had to act immediately in order to prevent the development of such a situation.

Ten years later, in May-June 1967, when Egypt concentrated massive military forces in Sinai, Israel decided to launch a preventive strike against the Egyptian army. The premise was that an immediate Egyptian attack is en route, and that if Israel would not precede and strike the Egyptian army, it may suffer a serious setback.

Since the end of the Six Day War, we have been experiencing an erosion of the doctrine of Preventive War in Israel's national security perception. As we can recall, almost all the military

confrontations in which Israel was involved since then broke out as a result of an Arab provocation – at different levels of intensity.

Apparently, the main reason for this erosion in the Preventive War doctrine lies in the fear that Preventive War might not be considered a justified war, and will cause serious damage to Israel's moral status in the international arena. At the same time there is concern, justified in and of itself, that also within Israel public support may not be given to a military act that is portrayed as a "war of choice".

A wide number of people within Israel believe that an Arab-Israeli peace agreement might become a reality if Israel would be willing to make the necessary concessions to the Arabs. Therefore, they may refrain from supporting a preventive war launched by Israel. They argue that Israel may undertake military measures only if and when it is attacked by an Arab state. A military operation that is carried out by Israel without Arab provocation would therefore be considered illegal and immoral.

At present, the State of Israel is engaged in a wide military conflict with a terror organization (the Hamas), who openly declares its desire to bring about the destruction of Israel. This organization had accumulated thousands of missiles and rockets designed to cause massive destruction in the cities of Israel. This organization has also invested a huge amount of resources in order to dig tunnels which will enable it, whenever it wants, to infiltrate Israeli territory and cause massive deaths among neighboring Israeli settlements. Under these circumstances, the question arises: Isn't it time to return to the old doctrine of preventive war, which was adopted proudly by David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan?

This doctrine would force Israel to relinquish the formula used to date, with regard to Hamas. According to this formula, if Hamas does not launch missiles and rockets against Israel, then Israel will also refrain from acts of violence against Hamas. This means that Israel does not oppose the idea that Hamas will acquire more arms. Israel will act against the Hamas only if there are Hamas makes provocations against Israel. Under the auspices of this doctrine, Hamas was able to build a stunning military power, which luckily did not lead to massive damage to life and property never known in Israel. Practically, this doctrine allowed Hamas to determine the timing of the current conflict, and to a large extent – its scope.

It should be clear that under the auspices of the doctrine of Preventive War, Israel may launch a surprise attack against Hamas even when it is "sitting quietly" for a long time. This will enhance the chances to gain a military victory. At the same time, it should be taken into consideration that large circles within the Israeli society and in the international arena might argue that Israel's leadership demonstrates a militaristic policy. They might also argue that Israel is getting itself involved in an unjustified war out of political, rather than security, motives.

At the same time, this doctrine will bring back the dimension of initiative and surprise to Israel. In a military conflict in which Israel is the initiator and the one that is surprising, Israel could probably reach greater achievements, in shorter time and at lower cost than it does now.

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