



## *Israel's Way of War: A Strategic and Operational Analysis, 1948–2014*

by Ehud Eilam.

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For at least four decades, military historians have debated the existence and nature of national “ways of war,” whether American, Afghan, or Soviet. It therefore seems natural to examine the violent history of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to identify the strategic, operational, and cultural characteristics of an Israeli approach to conflict. Former soldier and Israeli defense analyst Ehud Eilam has now written a carefully researched “personal treatise” (1) on the subject based on his own observations and analyses. Although it features many relevant historical examples, *Israel's Way of War* is a study of national security rather than military history. (Its two-page index includes no entries for Israel's major wars.)

Typically, investigations of this topic stress the origins of Israel's approach to mechanized, maneuver warfare, beginning with its need to fight preemptive conflicts by mobilizing and striking before its adversaries. The goal was always short, decisive clashes with minimal casualties, allowing the IDF's citizen soldiers to resume peacetime occupations as quickly as possible. Indeed, after four major conflicts in a span of twenty-five-years, those reservists were often more experienced than the younger, active-duty conscripts. But, however successful these reservists might be in battle, the numerical disparity and enduring antipathy between the Israeli and Arab populations made victory on the strategic level only temporary.

Of necessity, the original IDF was a light infantry force, but, between the 1956 and 1967 wars, it developed a robust mechanized force that, like the Wehrmacht in 1941–43, relied too heavily on the combination of tanks and fighter-bombers. In 1973, sophisticated Egyptian anti-tank and air defense missiles exposed the vulnerability of the tank-aircraft team, prompting Israel to adopt a broader, combined arms approach during the 1970s and 1980s.

Eilam concentrates on linking this high-intensity form of conflict with Israel's need to wage low-intensity and even compound wars:

Although Israel was compelled to retreat from the Gaza Strip in early 1957, it is possible that the withdrawal saved Israel from enduring a low-intensity war. Insurgents could have confronted the IDF in the Gaza Strip as part of Egypt's attempt to gain back its lost territory. After all, Egypt had already used the Palestinians against Israel during the border wars before 1956. One of Israel's goals in the 1956 war was to destroy the infrastructure of terror and guerrilla warfare in the Gaza Strip. The IDF accomplished this mission, and the border between Egypt and Israel, including the Gaza Strip, was relatively quiet in the upcoming years, at least until 1962. In this sense, a high-intensity war stopped a border war. All the Israeli strikes on the front until 1956, during the border wars, were not as effective as one large offensive in a high-intensity war. (55)

Over time, the IDF became so adept at high-intensity conflict as to deter its opponents from attempting any conventional attacks. The failure of Arab states to achieve the Palestinians' goals saw a concomitant rise in Palestinian terrorism. After Egypt and Syria failed while using the in-

surgents for their own purposes in the 1950s and 1960s, the Palestinians developed their own independent forms of warfare.

The IDF, designed for short, decisive conflicts, found it hard to cope with the continual low-level activity of terrorists (and, later, demonstrators). Although the 1982 invasion of Lebanon initially disrupted Palestinian command and control, it also spawned an eighteen-year counterinsurgency. Eilam notes that special units were formed to deal with terrorism during the 1990s, but acknowledges that Israel was surprised by its initial clashes with the Palestinian Authority in 1996. Moreover, diverting reservists from their annual training to secure the West Bank during the intifada degraded basic IDF skills, as evidenced in the 2006 hybrid/compound war in Lebanon.

The author's comparisons of low-intensity Israeli conflicts with those of the United States are sometimes illuminating: he notes, for example, that Moshe Dayan diagnosed the American problem as being a foreign power in Vietnam, while he himself repeated the same mistake in dealing with Palestinians on the West Bank. But his search for parallels can be labored and unconvincing, as when he equates the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which battled massive North Vietnamese invasions in 1973–75, with the unreliable Army of South Lebanon, Israel's surrogate against Hezbollah.

Even such occasional flaws reflect a strength of this book—its insights into the IDF's handling of its strategic quandary. Ehud Eilam views everything—the Palestinians, the Cold War, the Iranian nuclear program, the Arab Spring—in the light of their effects on Israeli security. His ideas can seem politically naive, for instance, concerning the possibility of the United States providing a B-52 with GBU-57 bunker-busters so that Israel could attack Iranian underground nuclear facilities (30). Overall, however, both students and experts will find that he has astutely clarified the IDF's way of war.