

Alexander the Great Would Not Have Been Perplexed

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War is above all a human-social phenomenon, and as such its principles remain, and will apparently remain for the foreseeable future, faithful to the unchanging nature of human beings. Based on this understanding, former Marine Corps General James Mattis, currently US Secretary of Defense, emailed his officers when he was the commander of the 1st Marine Division, before the division left for operational duties in Iraq. In reply to those who claimed that the nature of war had fundamentally changed and the tactics were wholly new, Mattis said: “Not really. Alexander the Great would not be in the least bit perplexed by the enemy that we face right now in Iraq.”¹

Similarly, we can ask if in 1967 or 1973 Arik Sharon had faced the challenges of the Second Lebanon War with his battalion, would he have been perplexed? Or in other words, would the change in warfare have been as dramatic as the theorists of the post-modern school try to argue? Have there indeed been changes in the nature of warfare that make the experience to be gained from past wars superfluous and irrelevant, or are changes a case of another development, deriving from a specific context, and requiring the adaptation of old but solid principles to a reality that is different, sometimes extremely so, from the reality in which these principles were defined.

While human nature remains fixed and dictates universal principles, the changing environment demands adaptation of implementation, sometimes in far reaching ways. This is apparently the most significant challenge in the world of warfare – how to adapt fixed principles to changing circumstances.

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Conservatives remain faithful to traditional templates that ultimately blow up in the first encounter with the new reality, while others create new templates that are not anchored in the universal principles. Both types are destined to fail.

One of the founding principles of the security concept of the State of Israel was the principle of taking the war to the enemy's territory. This led to the establishment of the strike force and embrace of the maneuvers approach, which sought to seize the initiative and penetrate deep into enemy territory in order to subdue the enemy as quickly as possible. Over a few years, the IDF developed impressive maneuvering capabilities, which led to victories on the battlefield and undermined the enemies' belief in their ability to realize their strategic goal – the conquest and destruction of the State of Israel.

Since the end of the 1970s, the enemies of Israel have adopted new approaches to achieve their goal of eliminating the Zionist project. At the same time, the IDF has changed its tactics to adjust to the emerging reality, which included an almost complete abandonment of the maneuvers approach that had characterized its spirit and action, as a new belief took shape that this approach was no longer suitable for the “new wars.” Is this correct?

This paper contends that it is not a change in the nature of warfare that has led to the preference for standoff fire over maneuvers. Rather, it is the weakening of military thinking, which has not managed to deal with the changes in the nature of the battlefield and not shaped a new doctrine² to confront the new challenges, based on the principles of the security concept. As a result, maneuver has been neglected, and emphasis has shifted to technology-based concepts of fire.

Doctrine as a Formative Element

War is a social phenomenon, and as such it mirrors features of the period, the spirit of the times, the perception of the threat, social mobilization, national resources, available technologies, and so on. Of course, war is also influenced by the balance of power between the enemies, knowledge of the other side, development of strategic and operational perceptions, and the processes of building forces. All these mean that no war is the same as any other.

That is also the reason why above all war is a deeply intellectual challenge. The element of surprise likewise plays a central role, because surprise undermines confidence in perceptions and causes embarrassment,

confusion, disorientation, and eventually, defeat. That is what happened to the French facing the Germans at the start of World War II;³ that is what happened to the IDF at the start of the Yom Kippur War, when its perceptions regarding air superiority and defenses against attack were shattered before the eyes of military and civilian leaders; that was also the position of Arab countries facing the surprise of the Six Day War. The inability to function was not only due to physical failures, but above all, to the gap between expectations of how war would develop and the way in which it actually developed.

Since the 1980s, the IDF has not managed to develop a doctrinal response that is suited to the fundamentals of the security concept and simultaneously deals with the new challenges of the battlefield. Meanwhile, maneuvering has dwindled and been replaced by fire and intelligence capabilities based on technology. In an article dealing with the challenges of force buildup in the IDF, a senior commander argued that the attempt of the IDF, in response to changes in the nature of war, “to avoid fighting on land, ultimately led to longer and less effective wars. We continue to strengthen our ‘healthy leg’ – the ability to assemble and counter attack, and are amazed that we can’t get rid of the ‘limp’ coming from the leg dealing with overland maneuvers.”⁴ However, thinking based on ruses must be strengthened, along with the approach that direct contact and rapid and aggressive maneuvering into enemy territory is the key to a decisive victory on the battlefield.

In the Yom Kippur War, after 48 hours of confusion, the IDF ground forces managed to recover and regroup, on the basis of a clear doctrine, well trained troops, and an experienced command array.⁵ To be sure, the fact that both the Egyptians and the Syrians decided to halt their offensives contributed to the ability of the IDF to regain its composure, seize the initiative, and turn the situation around in spite of the difficult opening conditions and the surprise that undermined the confidence of the decision makers. Even though it is seared into our consciousness as a failure, the Yom Kippur War was actually an impressive military victory, the outcome of a security concept and doctrine that were shaped during the 1950s and refined by means of developing military thinking and drawing on vast amounts of accumulated experience.

In 2000, the IDF was fighting the Palestinians with no suitable doctrine and without the capability of dealing with the challenges created by the conflict. The result was that for a year and a half the Palestinians controlled events, while the IDF and the security system had no effective response.

Determined political leadership and the initiatives of field commanders led the security establishment, including the IDF, to shift the existing perceptions of leverage and erosion, and to formulate an approach of decisive victory based on recapturing territory and taking the initiative. The IDF demonstrated that with the help of rapid maneuvers that it utilized in Operation Defensive Shield and the transfer of the fighting to enemy territory – fundamentals of the doctrine that developed during 1950s and 1960s – it was possible to overcome the Palestinians and create the conditions for defeating terror, even in conflicts with completely different features. These military moves provided the infrastructure for a dramatic improvement in the security of the Israeli population, and later for economic growth and the creation of conditions for political moves.⁶ In Judea and Samaria, the IDF returned to the idea of maneuvers within enemy territory, albeit maneuvers completely different from those of other wars, and it led to a huge achievement that has still not been replicated in any other arena of war in the world.

In the Gaza Strip, on the other hand, the IDF continued the concept of using standoff fire, mainly out of a sense that terror could be contained by the security fence.⁷ When Ben Gurion spent time in London during the blitz, he came to the conclusion that people are not broken by bombing; the attempt to prove otherwise always collapses in the face of reality. However, in Gaza this approach failed. While terror from Judea and Samaria, which constituted an acute strategic problem, was reduced dramatically, the threat from the direction of Gaza grew stronger. Nonetheless, this is the same war, with the same enemy, the same society, and the same international arena. The main difference between the two arenas lay in the decision to adopt the paradigm of decisive victory in Judea and Samaria while maintaining the paradigm of containment in Gaza. The results are clear to this day.

There are two traditional concepts for fighting an enemy that use guerilla and terror methods – counter warfare that includes accurate remote fire, and the direct contact approach, which seeks direct combat with the enemy on its territory. Using the counter warfare tactic ensures operational gains but has many limitations: first, the duration of technological advantage is limited, and the enemy will find ways to overcome it; second, counter warfare glorifies opposition, because the frequent use of smart weapon systems creates “a platform for glorifying the stone in the hand of a child against a helicopter, and the improvised explosive device against an airplane”; third, the collateral damage caused by counter action includes killing and injuring

innocent civilians alongside the terrorists. Alternatively, the direct contact approach requires moving the fighting to the enemy's territory, high speed movement and fire, and a high rate of incursions, while pursuing secret activity, utilizing surprise, and minimizing collateral damage.

The difference between these operational perceptions is also expressed in the commander's dimension. In the counter warfare approach, commanders of operations are located in remote technology centers, while in the direct contact approach, the commander has "direct, unmediated contact with the ground forces in the operational space."⁸

Over many years, beginning in the years when the IDF was present in the security zone, in a slow, ongoing process, the IDF began to abandon the fundamental elements of its doctrine. Ground maneuvers, which were the heart of the strike force, lost their centrality,⁹ and even more so, began to lose their defensive nature. It was only in 2006 that this trend was formally articulated in an official IDF document. The operational approach published that year by the General Staff stated that the nature of war had changed and it was necessary to adopt a new approach, centering on fire based on intelligence. Ground maneuvers were given only a secondary role in this perception. Keshet, the long term plan devised by General Staff divisions, reflected this approach and prompted a sharp cutback in the capabilities and battle order of the ground forces, including dismantling the regimental headquarters. The Second Lebanon War, which broke out a few months later, forced the IDF to reconsider this route. Indeed, every doctrine is the result of the military leader's decision.

A doctrinaire approach is almost never the only choice; in most cases it is chosen by the military leader. It is certainly possible to imagine that under a different leadership, the wars between Israel and the Arab countries in the early years of the state would have been conducted differently. The decisive victory approach propounded by Ben Gurion was not the outcome of a factual situation that could lead to only one definitive outcome, but mainly the result of a leadership decision by Ben Gurion, who spent much time studying the security problems predicted for the State of Israel, and who understood that protracted wars, such as the War of Independence, with the heavy

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price it exacted from the newborn state, would work against the essential interests of the Zionist project.¹⁰

Moreover, the War of Independence fought first by the pre-state Jewish settlement (*yishuv*) and later the state, had features that were entirely different from those around which Ben Gurion designed his security approach and the doctrine he later formulated. His understanding that the coming wars would be essentially different and that the IDF had to be built as a professional army with an offensive doctrine was at the core of the argument between him and the former Haganah fighters. In other words, the choice in the decisive victory approach adopted by Ben Gurion was not the necessary conclusion or the “natural” choice in view of the given factual situation at the end of the 1940s and start of the 1950s – far from it. Few at that time saw the whole picture as it took shape in Ben Gurion’s head. The dynamics of the security mechanisms pushed in quite different directions.¹¹

Military Thinking at the Heart of Warfare

War changes its face all the time. The winner is the first one to understand the singular features of future wars and acquire the ability to change in order to operate effectively in these conditions. The phenomenon of preparing for the wars of the past is familiar, and usually derives from conservatism and stagnant thinking.¹² There are few military leaders who are able to look beyond the fog and decipher the signs of the future battlefield. The rarest among them are those who are prepared to use their weight to shatter paradigms that are no longer valid and replace them with a new foundation.

In its early days Israeli military thinking drew from three main sources. The first was British military thinking brought by veterans of the Jewish Brigade in World War II, whose approach to the military trade was based on professional methodology. The second was the extensive battle experience accumulated by Haganah commanders before and during the War of Independence.¹³ They emphasized the special spirit of its military arm, the Palmach, and tended to reject the idea of professionalization and establishment in the transition from *yishuv* to state. The third was the extensive universal experience acquired during the Second World War, for example, the idea of the blitzkrieg, which was translated into the Israeli strike force based, and not by chance, on an air force and mobile ground forces whose purpose was to take the fighting quickly deep into the enemy’s territory. In addition, the process of training senior commanders in overseas

military colleges constituted an important factor in the development of Israeli thinking, and served as the basis for its professional and intellectual development.

Since the Six Day War, and even more so after the Yom Kippur War, Israeli thinking has undergone a transformation, moving more and more toward the American way of thinking – toward an approach based on technology. The American approach of erosion or exhaustion¹⁴ was the complete opposite of the Israeli maneuvers approach that was dominant until the early 1980s. The idea that it was possible to erode the enemy's capabilities based on technological advantages and superior power, thus leading to its defeat, is the typical American approach, but it was completely unsuitable for the IDF, because of the required patience, the element of international legitimacy that provides the necessary freedom of activity to implement this approach, and the ongoing threat to the civilian front. The attempts to develop a pattern of technology-based erosion, a pattern that the IDF began to adopt in the early 1990s, was destined to fail. The IDF attempt to retain this approach, which was from the start completely contrary to its proven security concept, is the core of the problem, and not the change in the battlefield.

The art of war is a slippery profession. It involves enormous danger as well as elements of honor, prestige, human life, and national interests. These are what have made outstanding military leaders into admired heroes and condemned the failures to eternal shame. Military leadership demands a deep understanding of the history of war, the lessons learned from battles, and the principles and rules derived from them. It also requires the ability to conceptualize, imagine, and create; the skill to analyze developments on the battlefield in order to prepare the troops for a future war whose features will be completely different from those of previous wars; and a deep understanding that the battlefield will continuously change and surprise those who are not properly prepared for it. Above all, supreme military leadership demands courage when preparing an army for battle and leading the troops when it occurs. Courage demands difficult decisions, the ability to adopt new approaches, and patterns of action, in order to adjust the army and its ways of thinking to future challenges.¹⁵

Development in the IDF

Over the last two decades the conventional threat against Israel posed by the militaries of Arab countries has declined, but the sub-conventional threat

from military organizations such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terror organizations has increased. The risk of a wide ranging invasion of Israel has become almost anachronistic, but the threat from non-state military organizations, which have acquired considerable high trajectory weapon systems, has grown. This change requires Israel to develop the ability to deal with conventional – classic military – threats; sub-conventional threats from military organizations and terror groups; unconventional military threats – nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; and cyber threats – damage to computer systems and communications.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the change in the threats, there is a greater disconnect between the IDF General Staff and force buildup processes, which for the General Staff have turned into a collection of projects initiated by the respective branches. At the same time, the General Command HQ, which was always in charge of the ground forces, “handed over the reins” to the ground forces command and later to the ground forces.¹⁷

These processes, along with hesitant operation of ground forces in conflicts fought by the IDF in the last thirty years, have created a sense among decision makers that the IDF ground forces are less relevant than the air force and intelligence to current and future battlefield challenges. While the IDF has invested more and more in these elements, the fitness of the ground forces for extensive maneuvers on the fighting front and deep in enemy territory has been weakened, and this includes the fitness of the reserve ground forces, which were once the backbone of IDF maneuvering.

In its early years, the IDF benefited from the intellectual input of veterans of the British army, who laid the groundwork for theories of warfare and training, and from an officer class with extensive battle experience in war, but over the years it has gradually lost this support that formed the core of its quality. As its knowledge of doctrine declined, the IDF turned more and more outwards, to industry, to find technology-based solutions, while neglecting to “develop its intellectual element.” As this aspect eroded, the IDF found itself without sufficient doctrinal knowledge on which it could base its response to the growing challenges. At the tactical level, IDF officers still received orderly training and accumulated some experience on the limited conflict battlefield, but it was clear that there were widening and deepening gaps in the higher levels of strategic and operative thinking that are mainly responsible for the development of concepts that shape IDF force buildup as well as the approaches to its utilization. The technological dominance that has gradually taken hold at the expense of doctrinal quality has led

to a dramatic increase in investments in pinpoint fire and intelligence, alongside ongoing investment in ground maneuvers. The deficiencies of this perception were striking during the Second Lebanon War.¹⁸

When Gadi Eisenkot was named Chief of Staff in 2015, this trend began to change, and considerable emphasis was placed on ground maneuvers as the IDF's main tool to defeat the enemy. Although the divide between the General Staff and the ground forces staff was not yet bridged, in early 2017 the IDF decided that General Command HQ would formulate the ground maneuvers approach and thus direct the building of ground strength (which would be continued by the ground forces arm). This decision in fact returned the General Staff to the role of commander of the ground forces, which had been denied to it for many years. This is an important step toward a solution, but there is still a long way to go to the required amendment.

Conclusion

It is not any change in the nature of war that led to the neglect of ground maneuvers, nor changes in society, but doctrinal weakening that caused the growing reliance on technology, at the expense of the art of war. Since the 1980s, the IDF has tried time after time to operate according to the erosion approach while making use of leverage, an approach that is strikingly opposed to the security concept that sought to shorten wars by achieving a quick decisive result based on taking the fighting to enemy territory, and maneuvering quickly deep into this territory. Time after time the IDF ends its campaigns with a sense of a missed opportunity, and time after time it returns to the approach of strengthening intelligence and fire in order to improve its performance in the next round of fighting. From functioning as the decisive element, ground maneuvers have become something used hesitantly and in small doses, if at all, usually at a fairly late stage and for limited tasks. It is a vicious cycle: as the expectations of the maneuvering forces decrease, so does their fitness to perform, and perhaps more than anything, the spirit that characterized it – the spirit of galloping horses – is gradually evaporating.

The only time in the last 30 years that the IDF operated according to the security concept of the State of Israel and took the fighting into the territory of the Palestinian Authority was during Operation Defensive Shield, when the forces of the Central Command¹⁹ and “the lawn mower” that followed, in the form of a long series of incursions into Palestinian towns, managed to contain terror and create the conditions for achieving its strategic goals.²⁰

Thus it was not war that changed its character, but rather it was a decision, very likely an unconscious one, of the security establishment. The question therefore that has to be asked now is not whether maneuvers are still relevant as the foundation of Israel's security concept, but what maneuvers are required by the IDF, and what is their ability to deal with the security challenges that Israel confronts.

The great military leaders understood people, what motivates them, what frightens them, what breaks them, and what makes them rise above themselves. These were and remain the foundations on which they waged war. The more the leaders can rise above the tactical level that is influenced by changes in the environment and technology, to the operative and strategic level that is mainly influenced by the awareness of human beings, the more the art of war becomes dominant. In this they can express genius, and the dominance of military leadership that knows how to turn deep understandings into winning patterns of warfare. Alexander the Great was a genius who fully understood the art of war.

Notwithstanding the time that has passed, the advanced technology, and the changes and upheavals that have occurred in the nature of campaigns since the days of Alexander the Great, ultimately the same principles that guided him, that obliged him to study war as a profession, to use stratagems, to recognize the importance of the territory, to know how to get the most out of it, and the need to have direct contact with the enemy remain as relevant as they were in his time. Indeed, it seems that if he faced the challenges of the present-day battlefield, equipped with ancient principles and his military genius, Alexander would need some time to study the unique features of the modern battlefield, but he would likely not be perplexed.

Notes

- 1 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 317.
- 2 In this essay, the term "doctrine" expresses the broader meaning of the word in the accepted British usage: "The whole array of military knowledge and military thinking (mainly from studying and analyzing military experience) that is accepted by the military as suitable for a specific time. This array includes matters such as the nature of present and future conflicts, preparing forces for the conflicts, and methods of warfare to be adopted to achieve success" (Dictionary of IDF Terms, 1998).
- 3 Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War* (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2011), pp. 95-109.

- 4 Aharon Haliva, "More of the Same," *The Dado Center Journal for Operational Art* 9 (December 2016): 17.
- 5 Amiram Ezov, *Crossing* (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2011), p. 276.
- 6 Eitan Shamir, *Mission Command* (Ben-Shemen: Modan and Ma'arachot Publishing, 2014), pp. 157-59.
- 7 Moshe Tamir, "Dilemmas of Warfare in Densely Populated Civilian Areas," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 4, no 2 (2012): 3-10.
- 8 Gabi Siboni, "The Military Battle against Terrorism: Direct Contact vs. Standoff Warfare," *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 1 (2006): 42-47.
- 9 The most faithful illustration of this matter is the erosion in the readiness of reserves units whose training became significantly more superficial while the condition of their equipment in storage units was deplorable. These units, which formed the heart of the IDF strike force and were intended to defeat the enemy, were given a minor role in both regular operations and war plans.
- 10 Isaac Ben-Israel, *Israel's Security Concept* (Ben-Shemen: Modan, 2013), pp. 27-34.
- 11 On this subject, see a review of the security challenges facing Israel written and presented to the government by David Ben Gurion in 1953. This review was published many years later for the public as an article: David Ben Gurion, "Army and State," *Maarachot* No. 279-80, June 1981, pp. 2-11.
- 12 David Ben Gurion, *Uniqueness and Destiny*, 3rd ed., edited by Gershon Rivlin (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1980), pp. 166-67.
- 13 Gershon Hacoheh, *What's National about National Security?* (Ben-Shemen: Modan, 2014), p. 90.
- 14 The erosion approach is based on the idea of overcoming the enemy by eroding its capabilities. This approach puts the emphasis on physical aspects of military power and assumes that the cumulative effect of the lengthy attack on the enemy will, at a certain point, break it.
- 15 John Kegan, *The Mask of Command* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1993), pp. 11-20.
- 16 *IDF Strategy*, Office of the Chief of Staff, August 13, 2015.
- 17 Ofer Shelah, *Dare to Win* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2015), pp. 183-85.
- 18 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *Spider's Web* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2008), pp. 76-85.
- 19 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *The Seventh War* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2004), pp. 235-69.
- 20 Ofer Shelah and Raviv Drucker, *Boomerang* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005), p. 348.