

OFFENSE AND DEFENSE IN ISRAELI MILITARY DOCTRINE

Ariel Levite



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MILITARY DOCTRINE

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Preface to the English Edition

The resurgence of interest in international security issues over the past decade or so has triggered keen analytic interest in military doctrines, their sources, dynamics and implications. A growing body of research has emerged in response to this interest — research that has produced many valuable insights into heretofore unexplored issues and phenomena. It has also generated a lively debate on the nature and severity of doctrinal military biases as well as on their consequences. This study was informed in many different ways by earlier research in the field, and was also stimulated by that research to address some of the outstanding theoretical issues that form the core of this academic debate. Yet this study was also motivated by a desire to generate policy-relevant conclusions regarding military doctrines, with particular relevance to those of Israel.

Whatever theoretical conclusions emerge from this study must obviously be considered highly tentative, given the inherent limitations of the research strategy (a single case study). The theoretical contribution of the study will nevertheless, we hope, prove to be of some relevance: the study attempts to refine our understanding of military doctrines by going beyond the relatively narrow cultural and temporal context from which earlier studies were drawn; and it explores a contemporary case. Future studies will hopefully go further in these directions.

The study opens with a brief review of the existing literature on military doctrines in general, and offensive doctrines in particular, as well as on causes of their stagnation and sources of innovation. This review provides the backdrop for an analytical historical review of Israel's offensive military doctrine and its evolution over the years. The study proceeds to critique that doctrine on both analytical and practical grounds, then offers some reflections on the changes that must be introduced into the IDF military doctrine in order to adapt it to Israel's current and future security requirements and constraints. An effort is then made to relate the findings of this study to the conclusions of earlier studies on military doctrines.

A final note to the non-Israeli reader is in order. The English edition of this book has been late in coming, and apologies are in order to readers who have patiently awaited it. Translation of the

book, which originally appeared in Hebrew, and its adaptation to the non-Israeli reader proved far more painstaking and time-consuming than originally anticipated. One particularly complex problem was the translation of Hebrew military terminology into English. Many terms commonly used in the IDF appear to lack foreign language counterparts, or have taken on context-specific meanings that defy accurate translation. Wherever possible, our translations of military terms derive from Yair Bourla's *Dictionary of Military Terms* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1988).

Still, the cloud has a silver lining: the delay was used to introduce significant revisions and additions in the book, especially in chapters 3, 4, and 5. These reflect comments and suggestions received after publication of the Hebrew edition, as well as a moderate change of emphasis from relevance for policy to concern for theory.

Acknowledgements

The research for, and writing of, this book spanned a period of over four years, during which I was a Senior Research Associate at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University. The Center and its staff, as individuals and as a group, contributed a great deal to this study; it would have been presumptuous, possibly even unrealistic to attempt it without their support. Major General (res.) Aharon Yariv, Head of the Center, deserves extra special thanks for his generous assistance. Few researchers enjoy the luxury of a superior who provides not only numerous helpful comments and suggestions, but also, and above all, constant support and encouragement.

My gratitude is also extended to many individuals outside the Center whose assistance in the course of the research proved invaluable. Unfortunately I cannot, for various reasons, mention them all here. I do, however, wish to acknowledge the special contribution made by the Center for Military Analysis (CEMA) at RAPHAEL, Israel Weapons Development Authority. It was from CEMA that the initiative to write this study originated; CEMA provided the Jaffee Center with funds that facilitated research and writing; and several of the researchers of CEMA read and commented on the Hebrew drafts of the book. Special thanks are due to one of those researchers, Dr. Ilan Amit, for much advice and support during the entire undertaking.

I am also indebted to several retired major generals who helped me in the course of research for the study, most prominently Avraham Adan, Avraham Rotem, and Herzl Shafir. Professor Dan Horowitz of the Hebrew University, whose original research into Israel's security conception guided me at the outset of my work, also assisted me by commenting on an early draft of this work.

A study of this magnitude obviously requires much tedious research, proofreading and editing. I was lucky to have received much valuable assistance from JCSS Deputy Head Joseph Alpher, who skillfully edited the book, as well as from Heda Rechnitz-Kijner (research and proofreading). Emily Landau deserves special thanks for her extraordinary contribution to the preparation of the English edition of this book. I would have been truly at a loss without her.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my family, above all my wife, Ziva, for sharing with me what seemed at times an endless labor

preceding delivery of the book. Throughout the entire period she provided me with understanding, encouragement and support that made this endeavor both feasible and worthwhile.

Finally, I must point out that this book does not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of either the Jaffee Center or any other institution or individual. Despite all the help I received from both institutions and individuals, responsibility for the final product rests with me alone.

Summary

Israeli leaders have traditionally viewed the country's military might as the principal, at times even the sole guarantor of its country's security. Believing that Israel faced an existential threat, that its very existence was threatened by its Arab neighbors, and that it had no reliable external allies, they reasoned that Israel, unlike other countries, could not entrust its security to alliances and/or political arrangements. Thus they concluded that the country ought to develop an indigenous and self-sufficient military capability powerful enough to deter any and all of Israel's Arab enemies and, if necessary, to win decisively every military encounter against them.

The centrality of the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces, in the maintenance of the country's security confers special importance on its military doctrine — the authoritative thinking that guides the design of IDF force structure and the conduct of IDF operations. Probably the most important tenet of the IDF's doctrine concerns the offense. It calls for conduct of war on enemy territory: at a minimum, for rapid and resolute transfer of the war into enemy territory as soon as it breaks out, but, indeed, for preemption as well if and when possible. The offensive nature of the IDF's doctrine is truly remarkable in at least two respects. First, it has come about despite the fact that on the strategic level Israel is committed to a defensive posture that supports maintenance of the status quo in the Arab-Israel conflict. Secondly, it has endured largely intact from the founding of the state to the present. Interim developments and upheavals in Israel, the Arab-Israel conflict, and the regional and international systems have produced few and relatively peripheral changes in Israel's military doctrine.

Astonishingly, the emergence of radically altered circumstances has not heretofore generated a serious and comprehensive reexamination of the doctrine and its applicability. The paramount place of the offensive military doctrine in Israel's overall security concept, its remarkable endurance over time, and mounting doubts concerning the feasibility and desirability of its implementation, provided the principal rationale for our reappraisal.

This study opens with a general theoretical and methodological discussion of military doctrines, their origins and importance, as well as the causes of stagnation and sources of innovation. It then

proceeds to reconstruct the offensive and defensive tenets of the Israeli military doctrine, traces their origins and describes their evolution over the years. It analyzes the present and future efficacy of the doctrine in light of political, military, technological, economic and social developments that have taken place since its inception in the 1950s. This analysis leads to the conclusion that Israel must overhaul its security conception, rethink its grand strategy, and revitalize its military doctrine. Specifically, it concludes that in order to meet Israel's security requirements for the foreseeable future, Israel must modify its excessively offensive military doctrine and adopt a doctrine that is more finely balanced in terms of offensive and defensive elements. In practical terms, this means the addition of a strong defensive component to the Israeli military doctrine and the corresponding indoctrination of the IDF officer corps. The responsibility for introducing these changes, the study suggests, must come from both the political leadership and the supreme military command.

The study concludes with an effort to place the findings of the Israeli case into an appropriate historical and theoretical context. It relates the Israeli experience to the ongoing debate in international security literature concerning the origins and consequences of military doctrines. One conclusion that emerges from this endeavor is that the Israeli experience is by no means unique, having many similarities with other historical cases. It is, nonetheless, possible to draw on the findings of this study in order to refine somewhat the existing body of knowledge in military doctrines, their sources, dynamics and implications.

Chapter 1. Theoretical and Methodological Background

Introduction

The principal focus of this study is on the relationship between Israel's offensive military doctrine and its broader security doctrine. In view of this focus, as well as the existence of a voluminous body of academic literature on the nature and essence of military doctrine, we shall refrain here from dealing extensively with the broader issue. Rather, we shall confine ourselves to a brief discussion of those general features of military doctrine that can assist in the analysis of Israeli military doctrine. We shall therefore touch succinctly upon only three cardinal issues: the nature and importance of military doctrine, the special appeal of offensive military doctrines, and the causes of stagnation as well as sources of innovation in military doctrines.

The discussion in this chapter will draw extensively on the existing literature in the field. While this discussion does telescope, refine, and occasionally even broaden previous studies' insights into military doctrines, its principal value does not lie primarily in any original contribution to academic discourse on these issues. Rather, it is intended to provide general theoretical and methodological material relevant to the Israeli case. This will permit the reader continually to relate our observations regarding Israeli military doctrine to other military organizations and their doctrines. A conscious effort to use the Israeli case for purposes of theory refinement will be made in the latter part of this study.

The Nature and Importance of Military Doctrine

Military doctrine is defined as "fundamental principles by which military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in its application."¹ Military doctrines typically deal with a broad range of military issues ranging from the strategic to the operational and tactical levels of warfare. At the strategic and operational levels (which concern us here), military doctrine establishes the principles that guide the design of military force

structure and operations. Its crucial importance lies in its role as the connecting link between defense policy and national strategy ("grand strategy") on the one hand, and the operational plans of the armed forces on the other. It is ultimately military doctrine that has to orient the military toward optimal attainment of political goals in a manner consistent with military realities.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty a military doctrine must overcome lies in the inevitability of some conflict of interests between political goals, objectives, and constraints² — and conventional military thinking. Frequent conflict between military logic and political constraints and objectives generates constant tension which must be reconciled by the military leadership formulating the doctrine. It can do so either by convincing the political leadership to modify its guidelines, or by abandoning pure military logic — or by a mixture of both. Ultimately, however, whenever flexibility cannot be introduced into political guidelines, the conflict must be resolved through deviation from sheer military logic, for in the final analysis the military and war must serve political goals.

The problem of devising a military doctrine does not end here; even after a doctrine has been formulated, it cannot be considered a permanent fixture. Reality is dynamic. Changes occasionally take place in one's security policy (and policymakers), in one's military posture, and commonly in the military posture of one's rival(s) as well. Developments on both sides, as well as in the balance between them, require constant appraisal of the situation, and this at times points to the need for doctrinal changes. Inherent in this task are many of the fundamental difficulties already noted, as well as a series of additional problems — environmental, organizational, and operational — that will be discussed below. In the absence of a military doctrine that is tailored to a country's political and military conditions, national political goals might become prohibitively expensive or even impossible to attain.

Considerations Underlying the Choice of Offensive Military Doctrines³

Numerous and varied reasons may account for a country's decision to adopt an offensive military doctrine over other possible military doctrines (e.g., deterrent, defensive). For the purposes of this study we shall assume the original doctrine selection to be

the product of an instrumental rational process, and review briefly only those factors that push for adoption of an offensive doctrine as a means to an end, whatever the end may be.

We take note at the outset that the nature of research carried out thus far does not as yet permit classification of the conditions considered necessary and/or sufficient for adoption of an offensive doctrine. Heretofore, the cumulative research effort in the field has only produced a comprehensive list of factors that *seem* to be associated with the choice of an offensive military doctrine. The list of these factors should therefore be viewed as merely an inventory of incentives to introduce offensive components into one's military doctrine. These incentives may operate independently of each other but also in some combination, with the relative weight carried by each incentive subject to significant fluctuation according to time and place. For the sake of convenience, the discussion below divides the incentives for offense into those emanating from a country's external conditions as well as its security doctrine and policy, and those deriving from military establishment preferences.

Security policy and geostrategic considerations. The roots of an offensive military doctrine may be in a given country's geostrategic conditions and/or its security policy. The incentives associated with these factors typically include the following:

- ★ Offensive goals. Offensive strategic goals, notably territorial objectives (expansionism and territorial occupation for any purpose), as well as the demonstration of power and attainment of prestige, act as strong incentives to adopt an offensive military doctrine.
- ★ Damage limitation. States commonly aspire to limit to a minimum wartime damage to their civilian population and infrastructure. But some states may assign this goal an especially high priority. The initiation, conduct, and/or transfer of war on or onto enemy territory, neutral ground, or even the soil of one's allies, are some of the more prominent conventional means for attaining damage limitation goals.
- ★ Unfavorable balance of forces. A balance of forces which changes to one's detriment or is sufficiently fluid to tilt rapidly in that direction, increases the attraction of a preventive war or at the very least of a preemptive strike in the event of a crisis.
- ★ Multiple threats. A country that is confronted by meaningful

military threats posed by several adversaries, has a clear incentive to adopt an offensive doctrine in order to deal with them successfully. An offensive doctrine makes it possible for the beleaguered country to take on its adversaries sequentially, in a timing and order of priority of its own choosing, rather than face a coalition of adversaries simultaneously.

- ★ **Geostrategic vulnerability.** The existence of threats to a country's territorial integrity constitutes another strong incentive for selecting an offensive military doctrine. Geostrategic vulnerability manifests itself first and foremost in a lack of "strategic depth," as measured by "the space between the furthestmost line at which a country may maintain military forces for its defense without impinging upon the sovereignty of another country, and its own vital area."⁴ The danger inherent in the lack of strategic depth may be further compounded by a geographical setting that makes it relatively easy for an adversary to reach the country's heartland and bisect it, or at least cut off its core from some of its remote regions, its satellites, or its allies. In these cases a premium is obviously attached to the option of initiating a war and waging it beyond one's borders.
- ★ **Absence of reliable allies.** Isolated states in the international arena that also face an existential threat from without may have to entrust their security to their military might. They may perceive an offensive military doctrine as an essential tool of their deterrence posture, lending validity and credibility to their threats to resort to war in the event of any impingement on their vital interests.

Preferences of the military establishment. Quite a few studies of strategy and modern military services contend that military organizations seem to have a pronounced, consistent and deep-rooted bias in favor of offensive doctrine. This body of literature suggests that when left to themselves, military establishments invariably tend to adopt an offensive doctrine. Moreover, this literature submits that whenever a non-offensive doctrine is nevertheless held by the military, it is usually found to have been imposed on it from above by the political authorities. The following considerations are commonly cited as principal sources of a prevalent bias in favor of offensive doctrines of the armed forces as a whole, as well as of individual services within them.

- ★ **Cultivating the fighting spirit.** An offensive doctrine is widely

considered a prominent means for instilling in the military a fighting spirit and orienting it to achieve decisive victory over its adversaries.

- ★ Securing a decision. An offensive military operation is widely believed to be the best proven military recipe for bringing about a decisive outcome on the battlefield. An offensive military doctrine thus prepares the military to conduct operations that bring the fighting to an end sooner rather than later (as a result of attrition).
- ★ Attaining victory and renown. Offensive military operations are not only considered an effective means for terminating the fighting. By inflicting a clearly perceived defeat on the adversary, they are also viewed as the principal way for gaining fame and prestige for the country and its military commanders.
- ★ Managing uncertainty. Military institutions, very much like other complex organizations, try to minimize internal as well as external uncertainty associated with their operations. These uncertainties can be significantly reduced if the military is permitted to adopt and ultimately implement an offensive doctrine. For an offensive doctrine makes it possible for the military to structure to no small degree its environment of conduct. It confers on the military the benefits of initiative on the battlefield as well as of a degree of confidence in planning ahead.

The appeal of an offensive doctrine is further enhanced by the competitive environment characterizing adversarial military relationships. It not only minimizes one's own uncertainty, but also denies certainty (i.e., maximizes uncertainty) to one's opponents. Thus it provides the military with a twofold advantage: it permits concentration of resources to execute a familiar and preferred course of action, while forcing the opponent to grapple in the dark, improvise and hedge, most prominently by dispersing his forces.

- ★ Influencing resource allocation. Two additional qualities attributed to offensive doctrines, both having to do with resource allocation, are believed to make these doctrines highly attractive to the military. The first quality is the impact of one's offensive doctrine on one's adversary's resource allocation. Assuming that he is aware of your offensive disposition, he is forced accordingly to allocate considerable

resources for the defense of his own territory in the form of infrastructure, training, procurement, deployment of forces, and so on. Given a finite allocation of total resources in the military, such defensive preparations are bound to come at least partially at the expense of the adversary's offensive capabilities.

Another commonly mentioned quality of offensive doctrines, albeit a less certain one, concerns its impact on the resource allocation to one's own military. Here the argument is that offensive operations require a high degree of military sophistication and complexity (e.g., in the areas of mobility and logistics), hence also a greater allocation of resources than other, non-offensive doctrines. Assuming that this argument indeed holds true, adoption of an offensive doctrine serves organizational interests by increasing the military's share of the national pie in certain critical areas (budget, manpower, technology).

- ★ Increasing organizational autonomy. A final source of appeal occasionally suggested to lie in offensive doctrines is their contribution to another organizational military goal: operational autonomy. Some scholars believe that offensive doctrines, by virtue of their emphasis on the brevity of the war and its conduct on enemy territory, permit a smaller degree of external civilian intervention in the affairs of the military. In contrast, defensive doctrines are believed to produce the opposite result. Since they tend to be associated with a longer war that is conducted on one's own territory, they are said to heighten the sensitivity of the political authorities, as well as of the public-at-large, to the conduct of the military, thereby infringing on its autonomy.

Conservatism vs. Doctrinal Innovation

Whatever the original motives underlying the adoption of a military doctrine, once implanted it begins to strike roots. In time (for reasons to be explained below) the doctrine exerts a powerful grip on the organization, developing, as it were, a life of its own, until ultimately it becomes impervious to possible change. Doctrinal continuity accords an organization a measure of stability and facilitates coordination within the organization itself and between the organization and its environment, thereby ultimately