

'Knives, Tanks, and Missiles':

Israel's Security Revolution

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On June 15, 1998, Eliot Cohen, director of the strategic studies program at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Michael Eisenstadt, senior fellow in military affairs at The Washington Institute, and Andrew Bacevich, director of SAIS's Foreign Policy Institute and director-designate of the Center for International Studies at Boston University, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum to discuss the findings of their new book, **Knives, Tanks, and Missiles: Israel's Security Revolution.**

(templateC04.php?CID=22) The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

The study had its origins in a commission from the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment to examine how Israel was dealing with the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) -- the dramatic transformation of warfare due to the introduction of new technologies to the military.

Israel's Conservative Military In Israel, there seems to be a uniformly negative reaction to the whole idea about a revolution in military affairs. This may seem surprising, because Israel would seem to be a country that would be quite attracted to the idea of an RMA:

- Israel is a very high-tech society.
- Israel Defense Force (IDF) tradition emphasizes quality, as in David Ben Gurion's idea of "the few against the many" -- the few compensating with quality for being outnumbered.
- The impressive record of Israeli innovation at the operational, tactical, and technical levels.

- The changing nature of the threats that Israel faces, which as Shimon Peres said, are a combination of the old threat of conventional military weapons (the tank), as well as the new threats of terrorism (the knife) and unconventional weapons (the missile).

But in fact, the Israeli military and defense establishment is much more conservative than most would think. This is due to a number of reasons. Israel's view of warfare is human-centered, with some skepticism about technology. Moreover, the Israeli military is a very large system that is hard to change in any radical way. There is little orientation towards education. And the senior leadership is extraordinarily stressed because it is not backed up by a sophisticated civilian leadership; the military leaders often pick up the tasks that civilians would do in other countries.

This conservative military establishment, somewhat bound by inertia, faces challenges by four fundamental sets of trends:

- Technological changes such as precision strike weapons, ballistic and cruise missiles, and the information revolution. One implication of this is the rise of the Israeli Air Force as a potentially independent arm.
- Strategic challenges. With the end of the cold war and the enemies of the peace process, Israel has been the beneficiary of change, but the intifada, terrorism inside Israel, and the possibility of "war after peace" has created great challenges.
- Economic challenges. While the Israeli economy is doing very well, and the defense budget has gradually declined as a percentage of GDP to 10 percent, modern technologies are extremely expensive. A related problem is convincing high-quality officers to remain in the military; the cost of salaries is absorbing 40 percent of the defense budget now.
- Social challenges. Attitudes toward the IDF and to military service are changing. Some of those entering the military say they want to be *sayeret o nayeret* (an elite commando or a paper pusher living comfortably in Tel Aviv). There are also demographic changes: it is estimated that by the year 2010, the IDF will not need 50% of the draft age cohort.

What Israel's Security Revolution Might Look Like Rather than simply adjusting to new military technologies, Israel may well be in the process of a much broader transformation, which Andrew Bacevich has termed "a revolution in security affairs." Rather than only involving technology, such a revolution would be a change in the basic structure of the Israeli armed forces and Israeli national security doctrine.

Historically, Israel's national security concept, as laid down by David Ben Gurion, rested on several tenets:

- A nation at arms, i.e., the idea that Israel has to mobilize its population through conscription and an elaborate reserve system.
- Strategic defense but operational offense. Because Israel lacks strategic depth, any war had to be carried to the other side immediately and war must be very short lived. Additionally, ground combat dominates the concept of war.
- A combination of self reliance and U.S. support.

The changes required would start with some substantial modification of national service. Instead of universal conscription, there would be a much more professionalized military. The officer corps would be more professionalized, with an overhauled military educational system possibly including an Israeli military academy.

Consideration should be given to creating a strong non-commissioned officer corps.

There would also be changes in military doctrine, such as: an operational doctrine more oriented towards firepower and less toward maneuver; more specialized forces; a smaller force structure; and abandonment of the concept of taking territory and then trading it for peace.

Lessons Learned For the United States. Most of the U.S. discussion on the RMA has been very technologically oriented. The Israeli case shows that the military faces a much more complex picture. Other forces such as transformation of the strategic situation facing the country, social pressures and economic changes are equally important. It is a mistake to label as distractions such controversies as civil-military tensions or a cultural divide between the American people and the military. The Israel case suggests that social issues are not peripheral but are actually integral to the changing military environment.

For Israel. The lesson for Israel is the requirement to look at change head on. As Ben Gurion said in 1950, "The most dangerous enemy to Israel's security is the intellectual inertia of those who are responsible for security."

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Alisa Mandel.

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