

Israel's Impending 'Revolution in Security Affairs'?

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Brief Analysis

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is considering a number of organizational changes that together could constitute the most far-reaching restructuring of the IDF since the establishment of the state. Although some of the proposed changes -- such as the creation of a strategic forces command -- are likely to enhance the IDF's operational effectiveness, others -- such as the abolition of the Southern Command -- are likely to be controversial and provoke much debate.

An Altered Strategic Environment. Two sets of factors make organizational reform essential for the IDF. First, changes in the regional strategic landscape have resulted in a radically altered threat environment. Peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan have eliminated (at least for now) the threat from these quarters. Yet, different threats have emerged: the rise of a nascent Palestinian state with its own security forces, the evolution of the Lebanese Hizballah into a sophisticated guerrilla organization, and the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), as underscored by the 1991 Gulf War. Thus, whereas through the 1980s the IDF focused mainly on dealing with the threat posed by rag-tag terrorists, guerrillas and conventional armies, today the IDF must focus on the threats posed by much more sophisticated terrorists and guerrillas, as well as WMD-tipped missiles.

Second, the portion of the Israeli defense budget devoted to weapons procurement, research and development, and training has dwindled in recent years, because of the growing costs of advanced weapons systems, and a dramatic increase in the portion of the budget allocated for salaries and pensions (19 percent in 1984, some 50 percent today). This financial burden has generated pressures for streamlining the IDF to enable it to make the most of its limited defense dollars.

Agreed-Upon Changes. There have been several minor organizational changes already decided upon. These include: 1) Establishing the existing Ground Forces Command (GFC) as a separate arm of the IDF -- similar to the air force and navy -- to be headed by a senior major general. The GFC, which is responsible for training and developing doctrine for the ground forces, will now be given a budget, procurement authority, and its own logistics capability; 2) Making the deputy chief of staff responsible for running the IDF on a day-to-day basis, thereby freeing (at least in theory) the chief of staff -- who is often involved in crisis management and overseeing ongoing military operations -- to deal with long-range planning, strategy and war preparedness. It seems unlikely, however, that this reform will take root in the hyperactive IDF; 3) Integrating the IDF's active and reserve independent infantry brigades into standing and reserve armored divisions, thereby creating a closer relationship between these units. In the past, battalions from Israel's infantry brigades would typically be assigned, on an ad hoc basis, to support armored divisions in wartime. In many cases, the units involved had never trained or fought together before. This new arrangement will thus facilitate combined arms coordination.

Contemplated Reforms. There are even more significant reforms under consideration, including the dissolution of the Southern Command, whose area of responsibility includes Egypt and the Gaza Strip. (The IDF has four regional commands: the Northern Command, responsible for the Lebanese and Syrian borders; the Central Command,

responsible for the West Bank and Jordan; the Southern Command; and the Rear Area Command, responsible for protecting Israel's civilian population centers.) According to the concept under consideration, the aforementioned Ground Forces Command would be responsible for securing Israel's border with Egypt during a crisis or in wartime. Such a decision would be based on the assumption that the regime of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak (or its successor) will remain stable, that Egypt would remain on the sidelines in the event of a confrontation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), and that Egypt therefore no longer constitutes a threat to Israel's security.

There are, however, those in the IDF who believe that such a step is being considered for the wrong reasons. They hold that such a reform is premature and driven mainly by economic rather than strategic and operational considerations. They point to ominous statements by Egyptian civilian and military officials in recent years, as well as Egypt's ongoing military modernization efforts. Yet, the fact that the main advocate for this reform is former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, a former commander of the Southern Command, gives this proposal extra weight. If Mordechai were to return to the Ministry of Defense after the coming elections -- which is quite possible -- he is likely to implement such a measure. In this case, Central Command would assume responsibility for both the West Bank and Gaza. In effect, Central Command would be responsible for dealing with the nascent Palestinian entity and for directing operations against the PA should hostilities break out. Concentrating such responsibilities in a single regional command reflects new thinking regarding the Palestinians, and an altered perception regarding the threat posed by the PA.

The other major reform contemplated by the Ministry of Defense is the establishment of a strategic command to deal with long range threats from countries like Iraq and Iran. The IDF hopes that the combination of various elements in Israel's force structure -- ballistic missiles, long-range strike fighters, submarines (perhaps eventually equipped with cruise-missiles), and missile defenses -- in a single strategic command, would allow these assets to be employed more effectively, result in a more coherent strategic doctrine, and enhance Israel's deterrent and second strike capabilities. Implementation of this reform will depend, in part, on the outcome of the May 1999 elections, because not all likely candidates for the defense portfolio are supportive of such a move. Supporters include Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Moshe Arens, and third party candidate Mordechai. On the other hand, Labor Party head Ehud Barak opposed such a step when he was IDF chief of staff, claiming that the threat of conventional ballistic missiles is overstated, and that there is no need for a second air force.

The Future of Israel's New National Security Council. The outcome of the elections will also determine whether Israel's newly-established National Security Council (NSC) will survive. Critics have been calling for the creation of an NSC since the 1973 war for three main reasons: to better integrate the products of the various government agencies involved in national security decision making, to institutionalize a decision-making process that has traditionally been characterized by a great deal of informality and ad-hocracy, and to ensure that national security decision making incorporates both assessments of the threat as well as Israeli domestic developments. Defense ministers, including Mordechai, have traditionally objected to the establishment of an NSC, claiming there is no need for another body to assess intelligence data. Yet, after the recent departure of Mordechai from the Defense Ministry, Netanyahu decided to finally establish an NSC, with Maj. Gen. (res.) David Ivry as head. It is too early to judge whether Israel's NSC will improve defense decision making or turn into a body that further isolates the civilian leadership from the national security establishment.

Outlook. The contemplated reforms discussed above are not cosmetic; they are likely to have a major impact on the IDF and how it conducts business. They indicate that Israel may very well be on the verge of a "revolution in security affairs" that encompasses not only the structure of the defense establishment, but the national security decision-making process as well. Previous chiefs of staff compared the IDF to a huge ship that needs to be carefully steered through troubled, and often uncharted waters. Fearing to rock the boat too much, they refrained from major

structural change. In light of the major changes in the threat environment and the financial constraints under which the IDF labors, it seems that whoever assumes responsibility over Israel's defense following the next elections will be unable to avoid taking this Titanic through the most radical reforms in its history.

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