Society Strength as a Base for Military Power: The State of Israel during the Early 1950s

Ze'ev Drory
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ZE'EV DRORY

This paper explores the societal factors which impact upon the capability of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). The nature of a nation's social fabric may both weaken and enhance its military potential and performance. In order to explore this nexus, military and social developments during the early 1950s are selected as a case study of the reciprocal influences occurring between these two spheres.

SOCIETY AS A FACTOR OF NATIONAL STRENGTH

'The doctrine of national security' presumes an ideational and principled basis for guiding national undertakings in different, and varied, areas. Its role is to assure national security in the short and long term by drawing on national potential.

This approach, which examines the security doctrine from a broad perspective, includes a number of variegated themes: a definition of state objectives; available state resources; and the geo-strategic environment in which it operates. The broad basis for a powerful security establishment resides in the leadership's ability to draw upon the state's social, demographic, economic and technological resources, as well as to actuate its political and military capacities through their proper mix and coordination.

MILITARY RESILIENCE

Military resilience derives from the capacity of a nation to realize its potential from all the power components that are available. These include the physical, economic, engineering and human resources, as well as the organizational capacity to build military formations which can mobilize the greater, and best, part of the population for the purposes of safeguarding the security of the nation; military formations, which contain the best quality military equipment in sufficient quantities to defend and secure the defence of the nation; the ability of military commanders

Ze'ev Drory is a lecturer at the Department of History at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

to orchestrate the weapons at their disposal in the right place and at the right time, both during periods of declared war and between wars, while maintaining a deterrent capacity. In long wars, and clearly in hostile situations, border clashes and continuous terrorist activities, the importance of the same resources increase.

From the moment Israel was established and compulsory conscription was implemented, a debate began over the advantages and disadvantages of a large people's army, as opposed to a small and professional military force. Manpower quality, as well as the national consciousness and loyalty of inductees, became the central components in the strength of a people's army. Strategic analysts and military leaders ascribed great importance to morale and the fighting spirit.

As the role of industry and technology grew in the military sphere, there was an increased need for proficient and skilled manpower in the military campaigns. The modern battlefield presented demands for qualitative manpower which could cope with the complexity of the war machinery on the battlefield.

One of the decisive components in national defence capacity is the human factor, the power of society, both quantitatively and qualitatively. For example, quantitatively, an optimal number of the state's population should be conscripted for military service as compensation for the state's numerical deficiency in manpower. Qualitatively, questions associated with the human potential touch on education, technological levels, and the ability to integrate advanced systems and operate them. In-depth and broad discussions on the issue of security, society and Israeli security doctrine may be found in two recent publications by Avner Yariv, *Politics and Strategy in Israel* and Israel Tal, *National Security*.[1]

SOCIETY'S IMAGE IN THE 1950s

The wave of immigration in the early 1950s doubled the population of Israel. In less than four years, from 1948 to 1953, the number of citizens grew from 700,000 to 1,484,000. This demographic change brought with it difficult economic and social challenges.

There were two principal sources of immigration: one was survivors of the Holocaust, homeless and bereft of family, scarred in body and spirit by war and the concentration camps. The second was Oriental Jews from the Eastern Mediterranean and North African countries, whose cultural and traditional background was different and clashed with the cultural tradition of the country's Jewish inhabitants. Moreover, the majority of immigrants had little formal education and lacked economic resources and a business/employment background, factors which hindered their ability to become integrated into the country's economy.[2]

THE STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION OF THE IMMIGRANT
POPULATION

From the establishment of the state on 14 May 1948 until the end of 1951,
700,000 immigrants arrived in the country. In 1948, 102,000 arrived, in
1949, 240,000, in 1950, 170,000, and in 1951, 175,000.[3] This was mass
immigration both in absolute terms and in relation to the size of the
existing population. The population grew at an annual rate of 20 percent
during these years of mass immigration and within three and a half years
doubled. By the end of 1953, the Israeli population had reached 1,484,000
inhabitants.

Approximately 80 percent of the population growth was due to
immigration and the remainder was a result of natural growth. The
immigration waves brought with them newcomers from different countries
with foreign cultures, customs and languages. Some upheld traditional
religious values, while others distanced themselves from any traces of
religion and Jewish tradition. So large and varied an immigration in such a
short period of time created difficult problems which had an impact upon
the formation of the character of Israeli society for many years to come.

In 1948, the majority of immigrants (86 percent) were of European
origin but after that Jews from African and Asian communities were more
numerous. In 1951, 71 percent of the immigrants were Asian- and African-
born. This change in the composition of Israel's immigrants brought about
considerable changes in the social fabric and structure of the Jewish
population in the country.

The educational level of the immigrants in the 1948–1951 period was
considerably lower than that of the veteran population. Among new
immigrant males over 15, only 16 percent had completed high school as
compared with 34 percent of the veteran population. Among those of Asian
and African origin, who constituted half the immigrants, only 8.5 percent
had received high school education.[4] The social and economic gap between
the new immigrants and the veteran population grew quickly, generating
friction and bitterness even in these initial years of immigration.

Mass immigration included different social strata and varied ethnic and
cultural elements. It was an encounter between worlds which clashed in
their outlooks but whose common denominator was the Jewish religion
and the desire to reach the land of Israel. This desire was due to a mixture
of push and pull factors. There were those who were driven by ideological
and national motivations. But there were also many for whom Israel was a
refuge and a shelter. The new immigrants arriving after the War of
Independence were, by and large, refugees who immigrated to Israel under
the necessity of circumstances, unlike earlier immigrants who were
motivated by ideals and a pioneering ideology.

Most of these post-1948 immigrants were bereft of all material possessions. They were sent to settlements on the country's periphery where conditions were difficult, as well as to transit camps and collective settlements on the frontier. Many did not find appropriate employment for many years. On top of these absorption challenges was the danger faced from external terrorism and insurgency which struck at morale and had negative implications for the IDF and security policy in general.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY

The doubling of the population in the first years after the founding of Israel affected security considerations in several ways. Only through a critical population mass, numbering two to three million, could Israel be secured. This rise in the population contributed to the basic resources of national security. In an age of total war, in which the entire population is mobilized, and certainly when the armed forces are based on military reserves, the size and strength of the population impacts directly on national security. At the same time, in the era of modern warfare, where population and vital strategic sites in the heart of the state are legitimate targets, the resilience of the population becomes a security asset or burden during periods of continuous violent conflict.[5]

The strength of the state is also measured by the resilience of its frontier residents. During a period in which the defence burden is placed primarily on the frontier settlements a relatively greater weight was placed on the national security aspect of the frontier challenge. The identification of the population with the state and its goals turned the entire nation into a *de facto* army. The resolution to withstand the daily security problems, not only in times of war, constituted a significant part of the power of the state. The level of education and the technological capability of society had an immediate impact upon the security and military capability of the state.

Immigrant absorption, and the doubling of the population, had conflicting influences on the formation of Israeli society in the early 1950s. It had decisive bearing for state security in two main areas: the first pertained to problems of security on the immigrant agricultural settlements and transit camps, particularly those situated along the borders; the second concerned the human and qualitative composition of the combat units during these same years.

THE NEW SETTLEMENT—PROBLEMS IN ROUTINE SECURITY MEASURES

The War of Independence did not solve the problem of the integration of the young Israeli state into the Middle Eastern region. Its very existence was rejected by the Arab world, and its borders were not recognized

as international boundaries but as cease-fire lines only. The Israeli leadership saw the territorial problems and the problem of refugees which the Arab states put forward as part of a grand strategy to destroy the Israeli state.[6]

Nevertheless, the political and military leadership did not foresee war with the Arab states in the near future. Their true concern was the fragile situation along the borders. Problems of infiltration, theft and, more than once, murder, reduced morale and damaged national security.[7]

After the War, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees lived in temporary camps situated along the borders of the state and in Arab countries, waiting for the opportunity to return to their homes. Arab states, with the exception of Jordan, placed the onus of responsibility for the refugee problem on Israel, and refused to work for a permanent solution to the refugee crisis in their own territory.

The Israeli position with regard to the refugee issue was in effect that of 'an exchange of populations'. The refugee problem for both sides would be solved through their integration into the countries to which they had moved. The Israeli leadership held up the example of the solution to the refugee problem in the wake of World War II, when more than a million refugees were integrated into the countries where they were situated at the end of the conflict and began a new life with the assistance of the host countries and the United Nations.

To fill in and close, even partly, the newly drawn-up cease-fire lines, to seal them against border intrusions, was a primary and vital component in the dispersal of settlements during the first years. The settlement policy was designed not only to solve the housing problem of the new immigrants but even more to respond to two worrisome facts reflected by the settlement map. The first concern was that only 10 percent of Israel's land was cultivated by Israeli farmers. The second concern was that most of the Jewish population was concentrated in the central coastal plain between Gadera and Hadera.

The government proclaimed the following objectives: dispersion of the population; settlement in the frontier areas and in vital locations as defensive belts; and also borders. In addition, there would be an effort to create an agricultural infrastructure to supply the basic food needs of the population.

THE CONCEPT OF TERRITORIAL DEFENCE

The security concept, which for many years stood behind the settlement effort, was called 'territorial defence'. This term was used to characterize the military conception for securing borders and settlements. The system relied principally upon the residents of the frontier settlements. The security establishment provided military training and equipment for local

defence needs and linked the individual locations to IDF forces in the area. The territorial defence system of the IDF served as an additional instrument in the war against enemy infiltration, in addition to its strategic objective— a defensive shield and initial trip-wire, a territorial warning system against enemy forces as well as a cover in the absence of strategic depth.

The integration of 'territorial defence' in the war against infiltrators during the summer of 1949 was an attempt to integrate all the forces involved in the struggle against incursions: the IDF, the police forces, settlement agencies, and the settlers themselves. In the following years, settlers would continue to participate in many operations aimed at curbing, and preventing, border infiltrators.

Increasing infiltration activities in the early 1950s, however, placed the settlers in dire straits. This led to a decision to expand the activities of the territorial defence network within the framework of the war being waged against border incursions.[8] The decision to involve new immigrant settlers in guard duty activities somewhat improved counter-infiltration efforts. The settlers underwent basic training in the use of firearms and took part in guard duty, which in turn raised the self-confidence of the population.

Nevertheless, the process of organizing and training settlement residents and preparing them for military missions in the war against infiltration was slow and complicated. Only after 1954 was significant progress made in this area.[9] The public institutions had exaggerated expectations of the collective settlements' abilities to cope with infiltrators and other security problems.

The establishment of immigrant moshavim (agricultural communities) as a security belt and as part of the security conception was of course a necessity at the time. Nevertheless, the socio-economic reality and the deteriorating security situation brought about by escalating infiltration and hostile activity often converted the asset into a security burden. In fact, the territorial defence system was neglected by the IDF, particularly toward the end of 1955, when the army was preparing itself for preventive war.[10]

The problem of infiltration became Israel's central security problem in these years. In the first fifteen months after the War of Independence, 134 people were killed and 104 injured by infiltrators. Driving on the roads was dangerous, especially at night. Driving to Beersheba after dark was avoided and cars could only travel to Eilat in coordinated convoys under the protection of the IDF.

The battle over the frontier was in fact a struggle over the state's borders. The fear was that the unstable and temporary cease-fire lines would be annulled or changed in the face of local circumstances and international pressure. Israel's leadership widely believed that the facts on the ground would in the end determine the state's borders. Any compromise or neglect of the boundary line would bring about a situation of a pregnable border, leading to the return of the refugees and the renewed settlement of Arab villages abandoned during the War.

When the data on terrorist and sabotage activities provided by the defence establishment for these years is examined, it presents a gloomy picture, not only because of the activities connected to infiltration, theft and robbery but also because of the security threat to the life of the settlers. The constant threat faced by frontier residents did not allow them to organize their lives normally and certainly severely impeded the possibility, for tens of thousands of new immigrants sent to the frontier settlements, of integrating their families into the young state.[11]

ABANDONMENT OF THE FRONTIER SETTLEMENTS—THE LOSS OF SECURITY

A 1953 report on Arab infiltration into Israel stated that the impact of these incursions was identical to those of irregular fighting. It was stressed that among the immigrant settlements the incursions had brought about a war atmosphere and desertion. It had also caused heavy damage to the country's economy and imposed the heaviest burden on the agricultural settlements in Israel.[12]

Infiltration activities not only caused loss of life and limb but also inflicted heavy economic and moral damage. The damage to property and the economic toll were serious, but the worst impact was on the components of national security, on personal safety within the state's borders.

The army and the police had to establish a security system which would routinely safeguard every frontier settlement. The settlements were not able to sustain the security burden by themselves and needed additional support in the form of manpower, funding and military and police forces. Constant infiltration activities instilled fear and even panic in many settlements. The feeling of insecurity spread to settlements situated well within the borders. There were numerous occurrences of people leaving the settlements and sometimes immigrant settlements folded; the abandonment of an entire settlement was a recurrent phenomenon.

The settlements in the Jerusalem corridor also suffered severely from the incursions and security burden, and many inhabitants left. Many other settlements along the state's borders and in areas distant from the centre of the country were harmed by the departure of large numbers of families, sometimes approximating 50 percent of the total families on the settlements.

Frontier settlements, which were to serve as a security belt for the state, became security burdens, hindering rather than expediting, routine security measures.[13] Already in 1949, the war against the infiltration phenomenon led to the formation of a Frontier Corps under the command of General David Shaltiel. The Corps received instructions to undertake defensive and offensive actions against the infiltrators.[14]

The Frontier Corps was a failure even before it came into existence. The dispute between the IDF and the civilian police force over funding and the

poor quality of manpower allocated to the Corps led the IDF to disavow any responsibility for the entire affair and the enterprise was discontinued in August 1950. There were additional attempts by the police force to set up a Border Guard during these years, but lack of cooperation from the army again contributed to the project's non-realization in the early 1950s. In July 1953, the Border Guard was established and received formal and practical authorization to safeguard the borders. The Corps was reorganized under the command of Pinchas Koppel.

The IDF continued to have responsibility for safeguarding the borders for many years to come. However, it had not been trained to contend with infiltration and encountered difficulties in preventing incursions despite the numerous ambushes and patrols conducted along the borders. Thus the IDF viewed the Border Guard as the body which would help in this difficult undertaking.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, was greatly concerned with the adverse influence which infiltration and hostile activity had along the borders. The fear that settlements would be abandoned as a consequence of sabotage actions and murders bothered him very much and he regarded it as a danger to the state's very existence.

In 1952–1953 extensive efforts were invested in strengthening the defence capabilities of the frontier settlements but it became apparent that Israel had not found satisfactory responses to the infiltration activities. In 1955 Ben-Gurion stated: 'We have formulated means for securing routine security measures after much searching and many false starts. We did not have the necessary tools and what we had was not suitable for the job. In addition, the course chosen was not correct.'[15]

It was Moshe Dayan who, as head of Southern Command in the early 1950s, prescribed the stringent military policy to counter infiltration:

> The Arabs … cross over to reap crops which they have sown in our territory, they, their wives and their children, and we open fire on them … We repeatedly have them enter minefields and they return minus a hand and foot … and I don't know any other way to secure our borders. If we allow shepherds and harvesters to cross our borders, then tomorrow the State of Israel will have no borders.[16]

During the struggle against infiltration it was Dayan who, as IDF chief of staff between 1953 and 1956, formulated the policy of retaliation and spearheaded its implementation. The oppressive influence of the security problems on the immigrant settlements was an essential factor in the failure to settle new immigrants in the early 1950s. Yet it was an additional, albeit important, element among all the factors which brought about the failure of the absorption policy.

The personal and social problems of the new immigrant population on the moshavim contributed to the instability and weakness of those very

locations which, in addition to all their other problems, could not maintain the added burden of defence. New immigrant moshavim situated along the borders in the frontier regions tended to disintegrate at a greater rate than those moshavim which were removed from such daily threats and anxieties.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STRENGTH OF THE IDF

Following the cease-fire agreements of 1949, the IDF underwent changes. Demobilization, the reorganization of the army, and the general deterioration of military spirit impacted on all areas. Many officers left military service and returned home, some exhausted by years of duty far from their family and some for ideological reasons. In his book *Pinkas Sherut* (Service Record), Yitzhak Rabin writes: 'Palmah commanders began to release themselves from army service not only of their own free will but also because they had no desire to cope with the ill wind directed toward them'.[17] Many commanders did not seek an army career and regarded their army service as a one-off mission. They were convinced that the cease-fire agreements would lead to a peace process and thus army service was no longer perceived as a challenge.

Beyond these factors, the army was busy reorganizing general headquarters, as well as developing a basic instructional system for senior commanders. The IDF was not prepared for a period of 'no peace and no war', and preferred to ignore the infiltration problems and to pass them on to the police and other bodies.

At the end of the war, the IDF numbered 100,000 soldiers, many of whom were about to be demobilized and were worried about adjustment to civilian life. Within a year of the war's end, the IDF numbered 35,200 soldiers, including 7,780 in the standing army and 27,424 in compulsory service. The induction of new immigrants into army service during the first years after the war projected the situation of the entire society on the image of the army and its capabilities.

The socio-economic problems and education level of the new recruits became the army's central concern and the source of its weakness. Battle units received youth whose Afro-Asian origins stamped them as 'second-class citizens', immigrants and residents of development towns and distressed areas. Very few native-born served in these units, and most of those who did were commanders.

Intelligence Unit, Department 3, which in its new framework was also responsible for reporting on morale and the mood in the army, is instructive on these issues:

> The tension in activities declined, black market dealings between soldiers and Arabs grew ... an unhealthy atmosphere is taking root within the army which needs to be remedied. On all the fronts, instances of soldiers selling equipment and supplies have multiplied and this must be regarded

> as a sign of moral debilitation and a weakening of the guard, and hence of the soldier's financial distress.[18]

Discussions by senior officers were devoted to the problems of immigrant absorption and the ability of the army to cope with the available manpower which constituted the backbone of the IDF—the fighting units. In a discussion with the prime minister and minister of defence, David Ben-Gurion, in April 1950, IDF generals raised doubts and resentment in light of the difficulties which they had to face.[19] The head of Northern Command, Josef Avidar claimed that a change of direction was needed in order to build up the fighting ability of the IDF:

> The situation today is as follows: soldiers who arrived as volunteers from abroad and have now served for a year and a half have not attained, at least part of them have not attained, a level whereby they could be considered soldiers who could carry out those duties which we wish to assign them, that would bear the esprit which is necessary for battle when the occasion demands.[20]

The hard fact according to General Avidar was the inability to select suitable soldiers for even squad courses—the smallest army unit. Essential factors, such as a lack of knowledge of Hebrew, no rudimentary school education, and a difficult family and economic situation constituted the grounds for incompetence and low motivation. The underlying value system of the veteran Israeli society and Zionist ideology were foreign to these soldiers. The new immigrants were concerned with the basic economic problems of their family and by personal and social problems. The central problem, as put forward by the commanders, was the lack of native-born commanders in the ranks of the IDF:

> You will not find among the instructors and commanders native-born Israelis … If the head of a squad who will lead a platoon tomorrow teaches the soldier Hebrew and shows him the ways of the country—something which we have to force him to do, this will only be carried out under one condition—that the squad leader and the platoon leader will be with their platoon. But what kind of squad or platoon leader is that?[21]

The command backbone of the field unit, of the level of the squad and platoon commander, constituted the weak point in the entire system of the fighting units.

The conscription cohorts for 1950–1952 averaged 6,000 inductees per year. The number of high school graduates per annum was about 600. Out of these 600, a high percentage never served in combat units. Some of them were directed to Nahal service and others to professional units which required a knowledge of Hebrew and a high school education.

The issue of morale and recruiting quality manpower continued to concern senior commanders during these years. The National Security Planning Branch in the Planning Division of General Headquarters conducted studies among IDF units to determine the quality of the armed forces. Among the topics examined were the level of education of the soldiers, their command of Hebrew, their social education (membership in youth movements, etc.), their service in Gadna, and their service in the Hagana.

In addition, the average health condition of every unit, the average age, family status, and job situation of the soldier, as well as family welfare problems, were recorded. Various surveys also checked the country of origin of the soldiers in each unit and the number of years they had been in the country. The place of residence of the soldier had great significance too—soldiers were enumerated in units according to moshavim and kibbutzim, cities and towns and transit camps.

The questionnaires also asked soldiers about the extent of their satisfaction with the unit, the quality of food and sanitation, their opinion of their commanding officers, the degree of concern and attention paid by the commander to his soldiers, their health situation and social welfare. An examination of the manpower data and the education level of the field units for the years 1950–1953 confronted IDF commanders with very difficult human and command problems.

Examination of reports containing the composition of compulsory recruits for the 1930–1933 cohort years uncovers interesting data in the following categories: educational attainment, command of Hebrew, IQ test, physical fitness, and family status.[22] Report data show that 21.1 percent of the compulsory service conscripts were native-born Israelis. An additional 16.8 percent of conscripts had arrived before 1947. The remainder, 62.1 percent, arrived between 1948 and 1951. Among this inductee population, 6.5 percent were illiterate and almost all of these (96 percent) were new immigrants; 72 percent had an elementary school education and 19.8 percent had a high school education; 60 percent of those with a high school education were born in the country or arrived before 1947; 45 percent of the inductees could read and write Hebrew, most of them native-born or immigrants who arrived before 1947; 43 percent could only speak the language and 11.7 percent could not read, write or speak Hebrew. These absorption difficulties found expression in two primary forms:

1. In the group which is being absorbed: through non-identification with cultural values and non-cooperation, aggressive behaviour, poor work efficiency, health, and so forth.
2. In the absorbing group, through the undermining of existing values, a feeling of social insecurity, prejudices against the persons being absorbed, and so forth.[23]

The document points to practical implications of immigrant absorption from Oriental countries on morale and trust in the military ranks. It cites evidence of violent brawls, disrespect, lack of initiative, a negative attitude towards the army, expressions of distrust towards military institutions, and non-participation in many educational and social activities. This damage inflicted upon military idealism and morale, might, according to personnel in the Manpower Branch create a large group which would suffer from deprivation and possess low morale, which could harm the fighting quality of IDF units.

The attempt to deal with these problems also raised simplistic suggestions such as the establishment of special training units comprised of Oriental Jews which would isolate them from other soldiers with the intention of nurturing an ethnically homogenous command staff. These commanders might then constitute a communicative link from the cultural vantage point between 'Western' officers and the deprived Oriental Jews. Suggestions to establish special training and instruction camps were rejected as senior commanders did not see nine months of special training as the solution to the creation of a command staff of Yemenites, for example, who were qualified to lead mixed platoons. The idea appeared to be invalid and contrary to the ideal of the integration of the exiles as expressed by army commanders.

The army establishment sought to comprehend the way of thinking, the desires and feelings of the Oriental Jewish soldiers in order to make their integration process easier. Who would be the best instructors and what would be the most efficient methods of instruction that would make these soldiers part of the culture and internalize the value system that the IDF commanders sought to impart to them? The fear of establishing units along ethnic lines was great and it was even regarded as dangerous should the experiment fail.

In tests for officers native-born candidates had higher test results than others, even though results for their initial psychometric grading produced no country-of-origin distinctions. While 30 percent of native-born candidates obtained a 'good' grade and 14 percent a 'passing grade', only 5.2 percent of Oriental Jewish candidates had 'suitable grades' and 6.4 percent 'passing grades'. Approximately 88 percent of the Oriental candidates did not pass the entrance exams for the officer's course and thus the way was blocked in those years for developing a cadre of officers of African and Asian origin. The process of socialization and integration of Oriental Jews into the military required many more years and extensive changes in the Israeli educational system, as well as in the overall integration into Israeli society of Oriental immigrants. Integration into the IDF command echelons changed from a slow and gradual process in the 1960s to a large-scale measure of success in the 1970s, the results of which can be seen even today.

According to the conception that was the basis of manpower policy, people with little education were sent to the infantry brigades, whereas those with an education were sent to headquarter units. At the headquarter units, there was a demand for personnel with reading and writing abilities in Hebrew and a high school education. As a result of this policy, the drop-out rate during basic training in infantry brigades was 35 percent and by the end of the platoon training period the dropout rate had reached about 55 percent. Battalion commanders demanded that unsuitable recruits be dropped not only because they did not train but because they got in the way and in effect did not allow the companies to undertake their training exercises. Commanders' complaints and the inability of units to operate during these years led to the ejection of hundreds of soldiers who in effect did not serve in the armed forces.

The problem which confronted IDF commanders was also faced by Israeli society as a whole and demanded, first and foremost, a long-term investment in Hebrew language education. The IDF was requested to harness itself to civilian areas in order to convey to soldiers, who would be citizens of the state following their demobilization, basic values in the areas of Zionism, geography and the history of the country beyond knowledge of Hebrew, mathematics and basic education. These same soldiers would enter the ranks of reserve units upon demobilization, and the army understood the important contribution which the reserves made to the country's security. Together with the long-term vision, the IDF had to provide an immediate solution on the operational level of the field units. The many problems in the area of instruction and training and in routine security activities required a response.

FAILURES IN THE OPERATIONAL ARENA

As discussed above, the central security problem confronting Israel in the early 1950s was infiltration. The rise in infiltration resulted in increased efforts to organize the settlements for defence and combat against infiltrators. These activities were only partially successful on the kibbutzim and fortified strongholds manned by Nahal, while frontier settlements, which were populated by new immigrants, could not shoulder the security burden. Many settlements were abandoned and the damage was not only material but also a heavy blow to morale.

As such, Israel began to adopt a policy of retaliation. During the 1950s the IDF did not have the means, or the manpower, to seal the borders hermetically in order to guarantee security. Passive defensive measures along the borders required considerable manpower and exhaustive efforts of the regular army observation posts, patrols and ambushes along the borders, with no guarantee that they would succeed in fulfilling their mission. Thus, the object of the policy of retaliation was to stop infiltration

activities while trying to impose the responsibility for coping with the phenomenon and combating infiltrators on the Arab states where they were based.

From the early 1950s, IDF units were sent on punitive and revenge missions against the villages located along the borders, but many of these sorties ended in failure and humiliating withdrawal. Units would set out for their objective but not carry out the mission. Infantry units would withdraw at the first volley fired by the Arab village guards. Some units could not find their objective, navigation was faulty, and there was a notable lack of motivation and combat leadership. Increasingly, the IDF learned to live with military failures in the frontier war against the Syrians, Jordanians, and the infiltrators from the Gaza Strip. This led to an undermining of the operational ability of the IDF and concern for Israel's deterrent capability.

During the course of 1953 IDF units failed in almost all the military operations conducted against Palestinian villages in the West Bank. These failures added to the long list of unexecuted missions, as well as falsified reports. In his memoirs, Moshe Dayan wrote:

> Many missions assigned to our forces during this period were not carried out. If they penetrated a village and encountered a guard, or were discovered, this often brought about a withdrawal of the force. Preparations were not sufficient; intelligence information was not updated. Even our elite units, trained for special actions, such as the parachute brigades, exhibited shameful laxity, and many of our actions ended in failure.[24]

On 26 January 1953, a company from the Givati Brigade attacked Palma Village, beside Kalkilya. The attack failed and the company returned without carrying out its mission. On 28–29 January 1953, a reduced battalion from the Givati Brigade set out on an additional attack against the same village. And again they retreated after village guards, soldiers from the Jordanian National Guard, humiliatingly routed the attacking force. That same night, fighters from the parachute brigade attacked the Jordanian village of Rantis, and there, the Jordanian National Guard as well as local villagers succeeded in driving the Israeli force away.

There were numerous other examples of missions that ended in failure due to incompetence, a lack of organization or motivation. Anyone examining the operational reports for 1953 and the beginning of 1954 cannot but be impressed by the number of sorties which were not carried out at all, that failed during the first phases of the attack and did not in any way attain the military objectives set by the command echelon.

The continuous failures of the IDF infantry units to carry out their missions led to the appointment of Colonel Yehuda Wallach, head of the Infantry Branch in the Adjutant General Branch/Training Department

as chairman of a committee whose task was to investigate the problem. His report, dated 17 April 1953, cited many points of failure in the assignment of manpower and the quality of the commanders in the infantry units.[25]

The inspection and critique were conducted for all infantry battalions, reconnaissance companies, squad-training schools, Nahal battalions, instructional bases at command and headquarter level. The report pointed out that soldiers from the lowest levels of the IDF were allocated to the infantry units. In addition, within a short time there was 'leakage' from these units of those soldiers who exhibited a higher performance level.

As a result of the drop-out rate 'there is no company which preserves its framework for more than a few months. The "veteran companies" in the battalions are simply what is left of 4–5 companies which have been depleted. The companies remaining are simply "leftovers" in the quantitative '*but also the qualitative sense*' (emphasis in the original).The quality of that manpower replacing 'drop-outs' was poor: As the report explained:

> While good soldiers were squeezed out—soldiers with a record of disciplinary problems on their bases or at different facilities are placed in brigades. Soldiers punished for possession of hashish, criminals and thieves ('graduates of the prison system'), pimps, and the like are from time to time sent as reinforcements—on an individual basis to the battalions.[26]

The report cited health problems which did not permit the stabilization of a training unit for a long period of time. In addition, emphasis was given to the difficult and numerous welfare problems for which no solutions were found and which constituted the main factor for disciplinary problems, absenteeism and desertion. The report also pointed out shortcomings in the brigade's training programmes and the unsuitability of the instruction given. Many platoons in the infantry units were commanded by sergeants due to a lack of officers.[27]

At the end of 1953 and the beginning of 1954 no improvement occurred in infantry battalions. The head of the Infantry Branch continued monitoring and reported on the matter in highly worrying terms.[28] The inspection team concluded that at the operational level there was no confidence in the soldiers in times of danger. 'It is possible to do a lot with these soldiers but it is impossible to rely upon them', the report stated.

Nevertheless, the report points to initial indications of native-born soldiers arriving in infantry units. At the end of 1953, these regular units were made up of about 20 percent native-born Israelis. Or as the author of the report put it: 'It is likely that IDF combat units will cease to be exclusively composed of "blacks"'.

The matter of mastering the Hebrew language was still a difficulty. Welfare problems continued to be the central cause of the lack of

motivation and functioning of the infantry units, while absenteeism was the principal disciplinary problem. About 80 percent of disciplinary problems pertained to absenteeism, the reasons for which resided in the soldiers' welfare background.

'In private conversations and through observation of privates I received the impression that the characteristic traits of the vast majority were: 1. Apathy, 2. Lack of ideas, 3. An extreme tendency to hold personal grudges and to satisfy personal needs.' The report mentions problems with the command staff as a central cause for the ineffectiveness of the units. The low quality of the squad chiefs was the weak link in the chain of command.

> Currently, the squad leader courses do not produce a command stratum with a uniform educational level. … Today, most of the good soldiers don't want to be squad leaders, and the superior stratum among the new recruits generally seeks out more respectable and easier duties than squad leader. The stratum of sergeants and company sergeant majors in the IDF do not have that standing which would constitute them as 'the backbone of the army'.

The evaluation of the officer class in the IDF, coming at the end of the report, is also negative, and points to fatigue and apathy. It cites a lack of motivation because of unawareness of the objectives and goals. There are signs of anxiety and severe doubts about the combat capability of units under their command. There is criticism of organizational shortcomings and the lack of ethical behaviour and honesty in the army.

As the situation along the borders continued to worsen and the danger of war was in the offing, the quality of the IDF, which was based principally on the infantry, continued to bother the political leadership. Despite rapid improvement in specialist units, like parachutists, the prime minister was sceptical and anxious about the operative capability of the combat units.

After Operation Sabha on the Egyptian border on the evening of 2–3 November 1955, an operation in which the infantry forces of the parachute units, Golani and Nahal overran the positions of Sabha and Wadi Siras, David Ben-Gurion asked to meet with the forces' commanders. At the meeting scheduled on 7 November 1955 in Jerusalem, the prime minister interrogated company commanders who had taken part in the battle about manpower issues and the morale of the combatants. His questions repeatedly focused on the quality of the soldiers, the composition of the combatant population, with an emphasis on the Oriental soldiers and their operative capability.[29] Despite the decisive victory in the Sabha operation, in which the Egyptians lost more than eighty combatants, sustained dozens of wounded and surrendered prisoners of war, in comparison to six Israelis killed and thirty-seven wounded, Ben-Gurion's tough interrogation left the infantry soldiers with a feeling of wariness and uncertainty.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined two areas—the defence doctrine relating to settlement along borders and the factors which impacted upon the unit commands in the regular army and the operational capability of the IDF during these same years. An accurate analysis of the data of the immigrant Israeli society during these years offers a bleak picture. The majority of immigrants were young, conscripted into the armed forces even before they had settled down in their new country and established themselves socially and economically.

Absorption and integration into the state and society required time and means which the state was not able to provide. Immigrants who were drafted justifiably placed personal and family problems as their highest priority. The army, which was also in a process of evolution, change, and organization after the War of Independence, was preoccupied with numerous other concerns, most notably preparation for 'a second round' of hostilities against Arab armies.

In the same period, a territorial defence system was built whose purpose was to solve the problem of the absence of strategic depth and territorial deterrence against a possible Arab attack. The defence establishment and the IDF sought to achieve this by training new immigrants living on the frontier settlements alongside the kibbutzim and the Nahal fortified strongholds.

The process of organizing the settlements for the war against infiltration was not successful, especially in those immigrant settlements located along the frontier. The failure to get new immigrants to build a 'defensive shield' was a fundamental error and the material, as well as the moral, damage brought about by the abandonment of the frontier settlements not only harmed the security of the entire state but also undermined the balance of deterrence towards infiltrators and their political masters. There was no security or settlement value in sending immigrants to frontier settlements.

With respect to the strengthening and improving of the operational capability of the IDF, there was a harmful impact on the level of the conscripts. The army had no alternative; it had to induct and train these young people and place them in combat units—resulting in the utter failure of many IDF actions against Arab villages along the border.

The senior command, which sought to circumvent the problem of deficiency in operational fitness of the field units, found a solution in the establishment of an elite cadre, Unit 101, under the command of major Ariel Sharon. In effect, the solution offered by the IDF in the establishment of this unit, and afterwards in its amalgamation with the parachutists' unit, allowed for the management of security problems by means of a select group of combatants—residents of kibbutzim and moshavim imbued with conviction, confidence and a high level of operational capability.

The parachutists developed their own doctrines and methods. It was the operational capability of the parachutists that allowed the IDF to carry out

its security missions during this period and to begin the required radical overhaul of all the field units.

Many more years were required to absorb immigrants into Israeli society and to bring about the accompanying improvement in army standards. Undoubtedly, as the years passed, there was a gradual improvement in both the command structure and the field units of the IDF. Military service itself constituted a central part of the process of absorption and socialization and was a central factor both for the individual and for the entire society.

NOTES

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