



**המכון למדיניות העם היהודי** (מיסודה של הסוכנות היהודית לא"י) בע"מ (חל"צ)

**The Jewish People Policy Institute** (Established by the Jewish Agency for Israel) Ltd. (CC)

# A STATECRAFT-SECURITY ISRAELI-JEWISH VIEW OF THE CHIEF-OF-STAFF'S DOCUMENT

## “ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES STRATEGY”

**Yehezkel Dror**

# Executive Summary

In August 2015, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) published an unprecedented unclassified 33-page document entitled "IDF Strategy," divided into five chapters, an introduction and a conclusion.\* The chapters deal with the strategic framework, strategic and operational environment, uses of force, command and control together with organization for warfare, and force structures.

Because of the importance of Israel's national security for the future of the Jewish people as a whole, the Jewish People Policy Institute decided to publish in Hebrew a thorough discussion and critique of the document including recommendations by the Founding President (Emeritus) of JPPI, Professor Yehezkel Dror. His essay is summarized briefly here in English.

The essay deals with the Chief of Staff document (hereafter, the "document") from a broad statecraft-security rather than a primarily military perspective. It broadens the discourse by adding commentary on its implications for the Jewish people and civilization. The essay recommends that the document be made available in English for discussion with Jewish strategists around the world, who have much to contribute to Israeli strategic thinking and planning.

The document is impressive. Developments since its publication show that the Chief of Staff is, in fact, doing much to upgrade the IDF. But more is needed, though the classified version may deal with some of the issues raised in the essay.

The professional basis of the document needs upgrading and essential "zero-thinking" (in the sense of thinking anew on an issue while trying to

---

\* For an enlightening discussion of the IDF document see Michael Herzog, "New IDF Strategy Goes Public" (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), August 28, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-idf-strategy-goes-public>

ignore accepted doctrines) is neglected. It is not clear how the document was approved by the political echelon and whether the IDF sought the help of other security bodies, especially the National Security Staff (NSS, formally called: National Security Council), in preparing it.

An essential insight for crafting strategies and directing warfare is the recognition of their nature as “fuzzy gambles” with high stakes, this being of the essence of choices in the face of deep uncertainty when outcomes are largely unpredictable, making thinking in terms of probabilities into a dangerous delusion. This is instinctively clear to experienced decision makers and commanders, but requires sophisticated explicit comprehension. Thinking in terms of fuzzy gambles could have improved significantly important parts of the document.

The document takes the Arab-Islamic Israeli-Jewish “collision” (the usual term, “conflict,” is too weak) for granted. But the essay claims that deeper understanding of it is required for upgrading Israeli statecraft, including IDF strategies. Some deep aspects of the collision are relatively stable and can thus serve as partly reliable bases for IDF strategies, but many attributes are in constant flux – posing a serious challenge to Israeli statecraft and strategies, which need constant revisions, including radical ones based in part on “thinking on the unthinkable,” which are lacking in the document.

The collision as a whole, which has lasted more than 100 years, was unavoidable in terms of historical processes, though its specifics have been and will continue to be contingent. The very endeavor to found again a Jewish state in the ancient homeland populated by a local population made collision inevitable, though its violence was initiated by the Arabs. The collision’s main features include a multiplicity of deep causes, incompatibility of narratives, stubbornness over time, an aspiration to destroy Israel with changing strategies, varying combinations of fanaticism and partial acceptance of Israel, mutable forms of violence with a growing danger of proliferation of mass-killing weapons in an

unstable region dense with conflicts, and non-state actors becoming increasingly important. Altogether the collision belongs to the class of “intractable long-lasting deeply rooted conflicts,” making its resolution or at least a “softening” very difficult. But, with all its importance, the Arab-Israeli collision, and within it the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, is not the main cause of the region’s increasing instability, which poses novel challenges to IDF strategy and to the world as a whole – as illustrated by the interventions of main powers in the Middle East, such as, after publication of the document, Russian military activity in Syria and expected harsh responses to Islamic terrorist attacks in Europe.

The collision has implications for the Arab minority in Israel, but reliable studies show that overall they increasingly accept living in Israel. The situation is different with the Palestinians in the West Bank and, in part, those in eastern Jerusalem. The essay notes critically that the document ignored the important roles of the IDF in handling conflicts with the Palestinians, probably because this is usually the responsibility of the General Security Service and special units of the Israeli Police.

Iran is not mentioned in the document. The essay assumes that this is probably a decision by the political echelon, and that Iran may be discussed in the classified version of the document. But Iran poses the most serious danger to the national security of Israel, and engages in aggressive activities including terrorism against Jewish communities broad. Therefore, not discussing the security challenges posed by Iran, however cautiously, undermines the quality and relevance of the document as a whole.

The overriding authority of the political echelon is fully recognized by the IDF. But the actual interface between them needs improvements that are not adequately discussed in the document. In particular, some of the IDF expectations from the political echelon posed in the document regarding instructions on war aims, desired end-phases of fighting and more are unrealistic, given the harsh uncertainties. On the other hand,

the duties of the IDF to present a full range of options, to explain salient disagreements within the IDF itself, and to encourage senior officers whose views are ignored. Furthermore, the crucial roles of the National Security Staff as the main staff unit of the political echelon are unjustifiably disregarded throughout the document.

The document does mention the cardinal need to pay more attention to statecraft considerations (including legal and image implications) in IDF strategy crafting and military operations, but its treatment of this cardinal matter is inadequate. To better take into full account statecraft considerations in IDF planning and operations, as urgently needed, requires upgrading the familiarity with statecraft issues by IDF staff and much deeper cooperation with the NSS and also the Foreign Ministry. This may well be the major single weakness of the document reflecting a reality that needs significant improvement.

The document includes a very short assessment of the external and domestic situations based on the intelligence unit of IDF. While recognizing the merits of parts of it, the essay claims that the discussion of the domestic situation is both superficial and beyond the scope of the IDF's mandate. It is recommended that future documents call for greater skepticism with respect to even the best of intelligence assessments and pay more attention to unforeseen and in part unforeseeable dangers as well as opportunities, including, hypothetically, "inconceivable" ones such as a devastating attack on Israel "out of the blue."

The strategies presented in the document are in part innovative, and well presented overall. But the IDF's continuous clinging to the classical principles of deterrence, early warning, defense, decisive action and victory, gives ground to suspicion of conservative and in part obsolete thinking, all the more so as the concepts are neither clear nor adequately explained. Inter alia, the essay suggests substituting "superior achievements" for "decisive results," and reserving the concept of "victory" for tactical and

local actions and the few cases of total war with unambiguous outcomes. Furthermore, deterrence is a slippery strategy dependent on an unachievable full understanding of the enemy's psychology and its being non-fanatic; warning cannot be relied upon; and the document does not present a convincing defense strategy against large-scale missile attacks on the interior of Israel, leaving open the possibility that occupation of the areas from which Israel is attacked is the only effective defense – this being a very demanding option unmentioned in the document.

Instead of reliance on partly outdated ideas, the essay proposes the addition of some strategies to IDF thinking, such as containment, throwing massive surprises, compulsion, recalibrating of force dosing, preventive war and, in extreme cases, “rationality of irrationality.” Also needed is a partly low-violence strategy of de-escalation and utilization of non-lethal weapons, together with selective, very painful hits in violent conflicts with the Palestinians.

Moving on to war-doctrines, the essay supports the document's emphasis on stratagems, but deplors the non-discussion of the creativity needed for them. Important is the document's emphasis on “critical mass,” but it should be clarified that it can be small or large depending on circumstances.

Cyberwar, focused operations, and initiatives by commanders are well presented in the document, but the essay recommends, among other proposals, adding new forms of high-tech operations, interdiction, and managing battles in terms of multiphase dynamic interaction to the IDF war doctrines.

While the IDF's high moral standards are proven, explicitly including the classical IDF principle of “moral purity of arms” in the document is recommended.

Overall, the document is evaluated as both pioneering and of impressive quality, but in need of much further work and better integration of its

components into a coherent holistic partly “grand-strategic” approach. This requires, among other improvements, further elevating the professional qualifications of staff officers engaged in assessment, strategy crafting and operational planning. Also, the essay suggests that the space and time perspectives should be enlarged with the help of an “upgraded central brain” of the IDF, so as to achieve 540 degrees of horizon scanning (360 geographically plus 180 to include the space above earth), together with a 30-year forward vista, however provisional and subject to constant revision.

Given some criticism and subject to suggested improvements, the essay evaluates the document as providing a solid grounding for IDF strategies for which the Chief of Staff and his team deserve much appreciation.

Throughout, the essay refers selectively to points of relevance for Jewish communities outside Israel and for the Jewish people as a whole. It suggests opening the salient issues for discussion at JPPI’s geostrategic meetings.