



1950's and 1960's:

- Shaping the Israeli State from the War of Independence to the Six Day War
- Shaping Israeli Society, 1948-1967

Overview

Yitzhak Rabin played a dominant role in shaping the country's military strength after the War of Independence. He took part in devising its military doctrine and filled a series of senior command positions in the Israel Defense Forces. In 1964, he was appointed Army Chief of Staff. Major challenges for the country included absorption of the huge wave of immigrants, uniting the diverse social and cultural groups, strengthening the economy, framing a democratic lifestyle and developing a modern army to protect a small country surrounded by enemies.

Shaping of Israeli society from the War of Independence to the Six-Day War

Development of the Structure and Military Doctrine of the Israel Defense Forces after the War of Independence

With the conclusion of the War of Independence in mid-1949, it became clear that the IDF had to be completely reorganized. Most of the soldiers that fought in the war had been demobilized and many of the commanders had left. The need therefore arose to create a modern standing army. Israel would also need to formulate a comprehensive military doctrine that could respond to the fundamental issues of national security. Finally, the army had to implement an institutionalized structural framework that would, among other things, ensure compliance with the IDF military doctrine.

It was determined that the IDF would be composed of a standing conscripted army, a relatively small career army and large reserve forces. The configuration was based on three assumptions: the borders of the State of Israel are long, and its area is small; the Arab states that surround Israel have not given up their ambition to destroy it and will therefore attempt to launch a surprise attack against Israel; and, Israel's economy would not be able to withstand the burden of a full-scale call-up of its reserve forces for extended periods of time. Given these considerations, Israel had to maintain a standing force entrusted with ongoing defense activities and stopping the enemy in the event of all-out war. Israel's would also need large reserve forces that would undergo regular combat training and would be drafted in the event of a war, enabling the army to make the transition from defense to attack.

Another important aspect in devising the IDF's military doctrine was the army's transformation from a mainly infantry force to a modern army in which the air, armored and infantry forces work together as an integrated whole.

Yitzhak Rabin's Role in the Formulation of the Organizational Structure and Military Doctrine of the IDF

Many of the commanders that grew up in the ranks of the Palmach and commanded combat units during the War of Independence left the army after the war. Yitzhak Rabin vacillated on this matter, but in the end decided to remain in the army. In the early and mid-'50s, he filled a series of command posts in which he contributed toward devising the military doctrine and organizational structure of the Israeli army.

At first, Rabin served as the deputy to Chaim Laskov, the eventual fifth Chief of Staff of the army, who at the time commanded the IDF's first course for battalion commanders. Rabin was subsequently appointed as Commander of the Course in place of Laskov. Rabin described the battalion commander's course as a "factory for formulating the IDF's military doctrine." Later, he again served as Laskov's deputy, this time as Deputy Commander of the Course for Brigade Commanders.

His first post on the General Staff was as head of the operations branch, in which he was responsible for planning special operations, ongoing security procedures, and the reserve framework. In this capacity, Rabin was in charge of two first-time-ever drills in which use of a supreme command bunker was tested in simulated wartime conditions.

Following studies at the British Staff College in England, Rabin received his Major General rank, and was appointed head of the IDF's training division. In this capacity, he and his junior officers, who included Matti Peled and Aharon Yariv, helped to formulate the IDF's military doctrine, primarily in regards to the instruction and training fundamentals for the various units.

Ongoing Security Issues in the 1950s: Infiltration and Shelling of Settlements

The most serious ongoing security problem with which Israel had to contend until the mid-1950s was that of infiltration of refugees and terrorist cells through the borders. At first, these were Arab refugees who wished to return to the villages they had left in 1948 or who slipped over the border to engage in smuggling or theft of equipment; but from 1951 onwards, infiltration by terrorist cells called Fedayeen became a critical problem. These cells struck primarily at residents of isolated settlements near the borders. By the mid-1950s, hundreds of Israelis had been murdered.

In response to these incursions, Israel adopted a policy of reprisal raids – actions taken against targets on the other side of the border in order to deter the Fedayeen. However, since the IDF was still being reorganized and was training its first regular-army units, composed mainly of new immigrants without combat training or experience, it had a difficult time contending with the Fedayeen. The situation changed to some extent with the formation of "Unit 101" under Ariel Sharon, which was the nucleus of the Paratrooper infantry battalion. The unit, which became the elite fighting force of the IDF, executed most of the reprisal raids.

The Fedayeen problem was not the only ongoing security concern of those years. Yitzhak Rabin, who was appointed commanding officer of the Northern Command in April 1956, had to provide responses to several concurrent problems: Infiltration by

Fedayeen along the northern border; attempts by the Syrian army to prevent Israeli fishermen from fishing in the Sea of Galilee; and shelling by the Syrian army of Israeli settlements and Israeli farmers working their land at the foot of the Golan Heights.

The Sinai Campaign

With the end of the War of Independence, Israel's political and military leaders assumed that a "second round" between Israel and the Arab states was simply a matter of time. On October 29, 1956, Israel initiated a military campaign against Egypt that was intended to disrupt the perceived intention that Egypt was preparing to engage in a war against Israel. Several factors led to instability between the two countries, and eventually to the outbreak of war: the foggy interim situation that came about after the War of Independence, which was fraught with perpetual disquiet along the border with Egypt; the closure of the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran to Israeli naval traffic, which constituted major sea lanes for Israel; and Egypt's large-scale weapons deal with the then Czechoslovakia.

The Sinai Campaign was coordinated with Britain and with France. The two ex-colonial powers were interested in protecting their interests in the Middle East, which they had dominated for decades. The two countries opposed nationalization of the Suez Canal and its conversion from an international waterway to one completely under Egyptian control, prompting their decision to join Israel in a war against Egypt. Although the British and French military maneuver went awry, this did not interfere with the attack waged by the IDF. In only a few days, the Israeli army captured the entire Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, which had been a focus of Fedayeen activity against Israel. Nevertheless, in the weeks immediately following the war, heavy pressure was exerted on Israel by the UN and the United States to pull back to the international border. Israel's withdrawal, which was carried out in a step-by-step manner, did not cloud the main accomplishments of the war: revival of its deterrent capacity against Egypt, preservation of the quiet along the Egyptian border for the next eleven years (until the Six-Day War), reopening of the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping, and strengthening the military relationship with France, which until 1967 continued to be Israel's primary supplier of military hardware. More than 170 Israeli soldiers were killed in the Sinai Campaign, which ended on November 5, 1956.

Shaping of Israeli Society, 1948-1967

Absorption of the Waves of Immigration and the Role Played by the IDF

Even while the War of Independence was raging, masses of immigrants began to arrive in Israel. Within a period of three-and-a-half years, the new state absorbed approximately 700,000 immigrants - doubling the Jewish population of the country. Most of the immigrants were Holocaust refugees that emigrated from Arab countries. The great challenge in absorbing them was that the state lacked the appropriate physical and economic infrastructure to do so. Housing, schools, jobs and electrical and water systems throughout Israel were of inadequate quantity and quality to meet the needs. The housing solution was to erect temporary cities built of tin shacks or tents. Additionally, the dominant culture of the Yishuv, which glorified the image of the Hebrew-speaking, liberated, secular, Israeli-born Jew, was alien to most of the immigrants who arrived in the early 1950s. This was particularly true for the Sephardim Jews from the Muslim countries. Both sides, veterans and immigrants, had a difficult time adjusting to this reality.

Having trouble contending with the problems of absorption, the civilian population turned to the IDF. This resulted in a prototype that was to continue for many years in which the Israeli army not only took on tasks of a purely security nature, but also those directly or indirectly related to shaping the image of Israeli society. For instance, the IDF joined in civilian endeavors such as pioneering settlement (in the framework of Nahal, an army corps that combines pioneering settlement and military service), education (through soldier-teachers), print media, entertainment troupes and immigrant absorption. In the early years of the state, this activity was at its height - soldiers assisted in construction and repair of the temporary, in the education of new immigrants, and more.

Independence Day Celebrations in the Early Years of the State

During the Yishuv period, the character and meaning of many of the traditional holidays underwent significant changes. Their national aspects were played up while their religious significance was downplayed. Independence Day was an entirely new holiday, so its meaning and rituals of celebration were not obvious during the first few years after Israel's independence was declared. The conceivers of this holiday decided it would symbolize both the advent of a new era in the life of the Jewish people and the continuity and connection with other more ancient holidays that celebrated national freedom, such as Chanukah and Passover. A primary place in the festivities was devoted to demonstrations of the Israeli army's fighting forces, military prowess and accomplishments in the civilian realm, such as education and immigrant absorption. This was reflected by Independence Day military parades, posters, newspaper articles and interviews.

Two events that became a tradition that are still observed are the torch-lighting ceremony on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem as a signal of the opening of festivities, and the presentation of the Israel Prize. The lighting of the twelve torches (corresponding with the number of the tribes of Israel) was conceived as the renewal of the ancient custom of lighting fires on the mountaintops to announce the arrival of the new month. The Israel Prize is awarded to outstanding Israeli citizens who have shown excellence in their fields. The subfields consist of humanities, social sciences, and Jewish studies; the natural and exact sciences; culture, arts, communication and sports; and lifetime achievement and exceptional contribution to the nation are cycled every 4 – 7 years. Other events that expressed the character of the holiday were dancing in the streets (an expression of happiness and a symbol of freedom and liberation) and tree-planting ceremonies (symbolizing the people's connection to the land and its renewal).

The Status of Israeli Arabs in the 1950s and 1960s

The War of Independence brought about a fundamental change in the status of the Arabs living in the new state. Prior to the war, they had constituted a majority of the country's residents; but during the war most had fled or had been driven out leaving those that remained a leaderless minority. In fact, during the War of Independence Israel adopted a relatively tolerant policy towards the remaining Arabs inside its boundaries. This policy was championed by the Minister for Minority Affairs, Bechor Sheetrit.

From the summer of 1949 onwards, the policy began to shift. On one hand, the Arabs were given Israeli citizenship and benefited from fundamental rights such as the right to vote and the right to run for office. On the other hand, they were placed under military administration, which meant that Arab citizens were completely dependent on the decisions of military governors. The military governors determined who would be permitted to move from one

region to another, receive employment, or be awarded a construction permit. The policy, which remained in effect throughout the 1950s, stemmed from an attitude, shared by successive Israeli governments, that the Arabs of Israel were hostile to the state and their moves had to be watched.

One of the most serious episodes that took place during this period was the murder of dozens of residents of Kafr Qassem by members of the police's Border Guard. With the outbreak of the Sinai Campaign a curfew was imposed on all Arab settlements in Israel. One group of workers, unaware of the curfew, were late returning to the village. Border Guard policemen opened fire on them, killing 49.

From the late 1950s on, many discussions were held on reducing or even canceling the military government. In 1966 it was finally abolished as a result of a greater sense of security among Israelis under Levi Eshkol, who had been appointed prime minister in 1963. Eshkol wished to be seen as an authoritative but moderate and tolerant leader, and therefore decided to suspend the military government.

Changes in Israeli Society in the 1960s

In the 1960s (until the Six-Day War), Israeli society was influenced by a series of significant changes and processes. In 1963, David Ben-Gurion was replaced by Levi Eshkol as prime minister. The Israeli public had to accustom itself to a different sort of leader; one that was less charismatic and decisive, and more moderate, tolerant, and, at times, diffident. Eshkol spearheaded several major changes in Israeli society. After a long period in which Ben-Gurion opposed any gesture that might have granted legitimacy to the Herut (the party that was heir to the Revisionist movement founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky) Eshkol agreed to have Jabotinsky's bones transferred to Israel. The state funeral for Jabotinsky signaled that Herut was no longer to be considered odious and loathsome. Eshkol also began the gradual process of eliminating the military government that had been imposed since 1949 on Israel's Arab citizens, and the adoption of a more tolerant and egalitarian policy toward them.

Another momentous episode was the Eichmann trial. Hitler's deputy, Adolph Eichmann, was captured in 1960 by Mossad agents in Argentina and smuggled to Israel. He was charged with 15 counts, including crimes against the Jewish people and crimes against humanity. His trial was the subject of immense public interest. It was the first time that Holocaust survivors were given an opportunity to tell their stories in public and it was the first time that consciousness of the Holocaust permeated the lives of those who had not experienced it. Eichmann was found guilty and sentenced to death. He was executed by hanging and then cremated. The execution of Adolf Eichmann remains the only time that Israel enacted the death sentence.

The general atmosphere in Israel of the early 1960s was a sense of satisfaction over the country's success at extricating itself from the major crises of its initial years, notwithstanding the complex problems that had not yet been resolved. In 1966, the Israeli economy entered a deep recession, which meant unemployment and a sharp decline in standard of living. The situation influenced the general mood in Israel. That year, the number of yordim (Israelis emigrating from Israel) exceeded the number of immigrants. Only in the wake of the Six-Day War did the economy find its way out of the crisis.