The Fall of the Iron Wall: Israeli Military Doctrine in Crisis after Al-Aqsa Flood

Tariq Dana

The Fall of the Iron Wall: Israeli Military Doctrine in Crisis after Al-Aqsa Flood

Series: Case Analysis

 31 October 2021

Tariq Dana

Tariq Dana

Assistant Professor in Conflict and Humanitarian Studies at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. His research concerns the political economy, civil society, social movements, state building and economic development, and the relationship between the state and society, with a research focus on Palestine and the Arab world. Holds a PhD in Political Science from St. Anna's College of Advanced Studies, Italy.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Since the early days of its occupation by a settler colonial state, Palestinian history has been punctured by a constant stream of milestones, not many of which can be considered as immense as Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on 7 October 2023. The operation stands out as an unprecedented shock to the Israeli army; with limited provisions and simple tactics, it undermined widely-held assumptions of Israeli technological superiority, considered a firm foundation of its military strategy. Given the continuous support and excessive confidence that the Israeli security establishment has received from the West, especially the US, Al-Aqsa flood came to challenge concepts of power and weakness, recalculating equations about the ability of the Palestinian resistance to adapt and innovate. It set off a strategic earthquake that shook the Israeli army and its doctrine to the core, and sparked a series of questions about future strategies for managing the occupation and the new balances that may reshape the region.

This crisis represents a pivotal moment in Israeli history, after undermining the very foundation of Israeli military doctrine. This is not limited to military concepts such as the deterrence strategy it has developed throughout the subsequent decades but goes as far as shaking very the pillars of the settler-colonial project. Israeli military doctrine is not just an operational system that determines war strategies and tactics, but is a defining component of Israeli mindset, identity, and psyche. It consequently forms a pillar of the central Zionist ideology in shaping settler colonial society in Palestine. Israeli academic Baruch Kimmerling described militarism as "central organizational principles" of Israeli society.[1] To clarify this, a general overview of what Israeli military doctrine is and its implications should be considered at two levels:

- **Strategic-operational level**: The doctrine that makes up the system of principles and concepts that define war strategies and tactics, military operations, and the security system.

- **The broader, "existential" level**: The military doctrine ingrained in society, culture, economy and other sectors, whereby military values and concepts permeate all aspects of life, including that which ostensibly appears to be "civilian".

I. Military Doctrine at the Strategic-Operational Level

The Zionist movement's early theoretical planning prioritized military force in establishing and maintaining a Jewish settler-colonial state in Palestine. Among the prominent ideas in this context is the idea of the "iron wall", first put forward by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of Revisionist Zionism.[2] This idea was based on the necessity of crushing of the Arab resistance movements militarily, with the aim of creating a symbolic and psychological wall that symbolizes the impossibility of defeating Israel militarily, and then forcing the Arabs to surrender and acknowledge the reality of the existence of this entity by signing peace agreements with it.

---

1   Baruch Kimmerling, "Patterns of Militarism in Israel," *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1993), p. 199.

2   Ze'ev Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall," 4/11/1923, accessed on 24/10/2023, at: https://bit.ly/3FsLrPN

The idea of the Iron Wall remains essential to Israel's intellectual and strategic structure, including the perception of military superiority and the centrality of the army as a fundamental guarantor of Israel's existence and endurance. Regardless of political orientation, whether right or left leaning under the Zionist umbrella, successive Israeli governments have adopted this approach for more than seven decades. This approach is central to understanding the dynamics and interactions in consecutive Arab Israeli wars, as well as in the peace and normalization agreements that were designed in favour of Israel.[3]

In practical terms, David Ben-Gurion is considered the actual founder of Israeli military doctrine. Almost every technical report or study of Israeli military strategy makes reference to his ideas in one way or another. Ben Gurion perceived the Arab-Israeli conflict to be a protracted existential conflict that would extend over many decades, and that it would penetrate all aspects of life. In this context, Ben-Gurion takes into account what he sees as immense strategic challenges facing Israel due to its narrow geographical location and the difficulty of defending its borders adjacent to several Arab countries. Additionally, there are huge variances in area, population, economic resources, political stability, military objectives and capacities, and diplomatic support. In response to these challenges, Ben-Gurion stressed the concept of the "Nation in Arms" within an approach based on comprehensive armament based on perpetual readiness for war, to compensate for the differences vis-à-vis the Arab countries and enable Israel to withstand and prevail in any future confrontation.[4]

Over the years, Israeli military doctrine has undergone several operational transformations and modifications, most of which were the result of lessons learned from the wars that Israel fought against Arab countries. For example, the approach evolved from a comprehensive focus on Blitzkrieg tactics (swift strikes and rapid aerial assaults), that were used in the 1967 war, to an increased focus on the defensive tactics while continuing to prioritize the offensive approach after the 1973 war, which revealed weaknesses in the Israeli military strategy. Technological developments have also provoked ongoing doctrinal modifications, particularly in intelligence, surveillance, and weaponry. However, the basic principles have always been guided by the legacy of Ben-Gurion's military ideas, with tactical adjustments to adapt to changing conditions. These adaptations are based on "the security triad" of three fundamental principles: "*deterrence* in order to prevent war, early *warning*, and a *fast and decisive victory* to quickly end the war." [emphasis added] The centrality of these principles was highlighted in the recommendations of the Meridor Commission's 2006 report; a fundamental reference for understanding the pillars of military doctrine over the last two decades.[5]

The Gaza Strip represented a fertile testing ground to apply the three basic principles of Israeli military doctrine; it is considered a hostile area and a source of training for asymmetric warfare against resistance fighters. The most violent models of military force were used against Gaza to contain it

3   Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

4   Charles D. Freilich, "Israel's Classic Defense Doctrine," *Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change* (2018).

5   Dan Meridor & Ron Eldadi, "Israel's National Security Doctrine: The Report of the Committee on the Formulation of the National Security Doctrine (Meridor Committee), Ten Years Later," The Institute for National Security Studies, vol. 187 (February 2019), accessed on 24/10/2023, at: https://bit.ly/3Q7K6CP

and impose technologically advanced tools of control.[6] However, Al-Aqsa Flood generated a major shock that exposed the shortcomings of these three principles. The following is a brief definition of each principle, and an evaluation of its performance in the face of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood:

1. Deterrence

Deterrence is contingent upon a demonstration of military superiority to prevent the resistance from taking any action. It can be active, through pre-emptive attacks, or passive, by projecting military might. Its psychological dimension is no less important than the material dimension. Furthermore, the "Dahiya Doctrine," developed by Israeli after its war on Lebanon in 2006, is an asymmetric warfare strategy based on the systematic use of brutally disproportionate force against civilian infrastructure and populations, targeting residential buildings, hospitals, schools, power stations, roads and bridges. Through the destruction of civil, social and economic fabric it seeks to economically stifle, humiliate, and break the will of the population, forcing them to rebel against resistance.[7] This is a blatant state-led terrorism. Based on the very definition of terrorism, which is universally agreed to be committing systematic acts of violence against civilians to achieve political goals, the concept is entirely applicable to the Dahiya Doctrine.

Evaluation: Catastrophic failure. Neither the material or the psychological dimension of deterrence succeeded in curbing the resistance, but rather created the means and tools that led the concept's failure. Considering previous wars on Gaza as proactive offensives based on the Dahiya Doctrine, the Occupation failed to achieve its desired deterrence by destroying the organizational capabilities of the resistance, both materially and psychologically.

2. Early Warning

This principle is based on the systems of surveillance and reconnaissance, which include satellites, drones, and intelligence. These capacities combined are supposed to provide a clear picture of incoming threats.

Evaluation: Catastrophic failure. Neither Israeli intelligence, nor advanced surveillance, recovered even partial notice, about the preparations for this operation, which is believed to have been under development for many years. Even US intelligence announced that they had no notice about an upcoming operation. On the contrary, Israeli intelligence estimates were based on faulty indicators that led them to rule out the possibility of any offensive by Hamas, especially as it had declined to join the confrontation against Israel in its recent attack on Islamic Jihad.

---

6   Tariq Dana, "A Cruel Innovation: Israeli Experiments on Gaza's Great March of Return," *Sociology of Islam*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2020), pp. 175 - 198.

7   Rashid Khalidi, "The Dahiya Doctrine, Proportionality, and War Crimes," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Autumn 2014).

3. Fast and Decisive Victory

This principle is based Israel's lack of demographic and geographic advantage to withstand a protracted war. Hence, a decisive victory must be achieved that quickly ends the war and achieves its political and military goals. This element also requires transferring the battle to the lands from which the resistance originates.

Evaluation: Catastrophic failure. Neither this war or any previous attack has produced a decisive or fast victory. Although the war began inside the Palestinian territories under Israeli control, its transition to Gaza did not yield any military achievements. According to Israeli statements, the war may last several months, thus contradicting this strategic principle.

II. Military Doctrine at the Existential Level

Israel was founded on an institutional framework that closely linked Jewish nationalism with militarism. This formed a militarized social contract between the emergent colonial state and the Zionist settlers. At the heart of this dynamic lies the Israeli army, which was born from the legacy of the Zionist militias that massacred Palestinians in a campaign of ethnic cleansing during the Nakba in 1948.[8]

Compared to other states established in the wake of World War II, the Israeli military occupies an unusually prominent position, through which it exerts influence – not only in the security and war industry, but also in the economic, social, cultural, educational, and every other societal domain. In contrast to traditional theories of civil-military relations, which often establish clear-cut boundaries between the military and civilian spheres in terms of structure, function, and symbolism, the boundaries between the military and the civilian disappear in Israeli society.

The Israeli military establishment is considered a vital channel for ideological guidance, political socialization, and societal engagement. It shapes diverse spaces that extend from education to the judiciary, settlement building, media, economic development, and the integration of Jewish immigrants, thus integrating militarism into every aspect of the Israeli collective consciousness.[9] The extent of integration between the army and society is consistently expressed in public opinion polls. According to a 2022 poll conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, public trust in the military far exceeds that in any other government institution. While 76 per cent expressed public confidence in the army and Mossad, just 27 per cent expressed trust in the government, 31 per cent in the police, and 41 per cent in the Supreme Court. Hence, it is entirely

---

8 Azmi Bishara, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice* (London/ New York: Hurst, 2022); Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

9 Uri Ben-Eliezer, *The Making of Israeli Militarism* (Bloomington/ Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); G. Sheffer & O. Barak (eds.), *Militarism and Israeli Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Kimmerling, pp. 196 - 223.

unsurprising that Israel has persistently topped the rankings of the most militarized countries in the world since the launch of the Global Militarization Index in the early 1990s.[10]

In Israeli society, military doctrine balances the contradictions in the diverse and complex social elements that make up the settler-colonial fabric. It is a society heaving with internal divisions, such as the diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds of different Jewish groups (reflected in a class structure that privileges the Ashkenazim), in addition to the secular and religious divisions within Israel. Thus, the military doctrine represents a kind of national mantra for bridging social and cultural gaps, especially by identifying the "other" as the enemy to create a permanent state of threat, instability, and conflict as a means of strengthening the colonial identity and its internal cohesion.

Economically, Israel is largely dependent on the "war economy". The country leads global military expenditures against GDP. These expenses are not limited to the direct cost of weapons and equipment, but include research, development, and investment in military infrastructure. Israel's military industrial complex extends to include various production and service sectors, reflecting the deep overlap between the private sector and the military apparatus. This is most evident in the close link between success of private business and its direct or indirect relations with the military establishment. The link is not new, especially in the tech sector, where about 90 percent of its workers have military experience and backgrounds. The sector in itself represents an important economic engine, amounting to about 15.3 per cent of local production. In addition, it is one of the leading generators of revenue, constituting up to 54 per cent of foreign exports.[11]

Perhaps the most notable fruit of the marriage between the Israeli military and technology sectors, which is directly linked to Gaza, is the "smart fence" that the Palestinian resistance managed to tear down and break through on 7 October. The fence is a conceptual embodiment of the iron wall physically and psychologically, representing the toughest example of electronic deterrence in the world, and the most violent and deadly representation of the siege of the population. The fence constitutes a huge source of income for the Israeli war economy – a model Israel sells to more than 100 countries. In a statement by one of the production companies, Gaza was described as ""Gaza has become a showroom for the company's 'smart fences,' as customers appreciate that the products are battle-tested."[12]

This intricate security system consists of an integrated technical system of cameras, sensors, and land, sea, and air surveillance devices, in addition, the fence is fortified by the See-Shoot system, comprised of a network of automated machine guns and robotic snipers capable of enforcing a nearly 1,500-meter-deep no-go zone. The See-Shoot system was first tested against the peaceful Great Return Marches that took place every Friday for two years (2018-2019), where automatic weapons

---

10 "Global Militarization Index 2022," Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), accessed on 24/10/2023, at: https://bit.ly/3M9Ezu7

11 Israel Innovation Authority, *Part A: Israeli High-Tech 2022 Situation Report* (2022), accessed on 24/10/2023, at: https://bit.ly/3S6To4F

12 Jonathan Ferziger, "Gaza Barrier Can't Withstand an Assault by Mob, Fencemaker Says," *Bloomberg*, 11/4/2018, accessed on 24/10/2023, at: https://bit.ly/406UUpe

detected the demonstrators and fired indiscriminately. To test the accuracy of these weapons, young demonstrators were targeted in the knee joint by the machine guns, leaving hundreds of them with life-altering disabilities.[13]

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood revealed the fragility of Israel's technological deterrence strategy. Using relatively simple tactics, Palestinian fighters were able to penetrate the "smart" fence at several locations, effectively disabling its infrastructure. Once seen as an impenetrable barrier, this expensive security fence has become useless; Palestinian fighters entered, almost unhindered, into areas under Israeli control. It shattered the illusion of Israel's impenetrability and technological might, which could have a major impact on the international status and marketing of Israeli security technology, with potential losses for the biggest economic sector.

Conclusion

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was not just a new chapter in the history of the long conflict between the Palestinian resistance and the Israeli settler colonial project but rather heralded a qualitative shift in the regional status quo. The failure of the Iron Wall, as a pillar of Israel's colonial strategy – will leave a profound impact on both the operational and existential levels of Israeli military doctrine.

This war waged by Israel is just beginning, but sudden and horrific events that may change its course, whether a ground invasion occurs, or the war expands regionally, which could further damage Israeli military doctrine and shake confidence in the army's capacity to protect the colonial project, its stability, and its sustainability. This could in turn lead to a deep crisis that questions the basic foundations on which the Zionist project is based.

---

13   Dana.

References

Ben-Eliezer, Uri. *The Making of Israeli Militarism*. Bloomington/ Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Bishara, Azmi. *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice*. London/ New York: Hurst, 2022.

Dana, Tarek. "A Cruel Innovation: Israeli Experiments on Gaza's Great March of Return." *Sociology of Islam*. vol. 8, no. 2 (2020).

Freilich, Charles D. "Israel's Classic Defense Doctrine." *Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change* (2018).

Israel Innovation Authority. *Part A: Israeli High-Tech 2022 Situation Report* (2022). at: https://bit.ly/3S6To4F

Jabotinsky, Ze'ev. "The Iron Wall." 4/11/1923. at: https://bit.ly/3FsLrPN

Khalidi, Rashid. "The Dahiya Doctrine, Proportionality, and War Crimes." *Journal of Palestine Studies*. vol. 44, no. 1 (Autumn 2014).

Kimmerling, B. "Patterns of Militarism in Israel." *European Journal of Sociology*. vol. 34, no. 2 (1993).

Meridor, Dan & Ron Eldadi. "Israel's National Security Doctrine: The Report of the Committee on the Formulation of the National Security Doctrine (Meridor Committee), Ten Years Later."

The Institute for National Security Studies. vol. 187 (February 2019). at: https://bit.ly/3Q7K6CP

Pappe, Ilan. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oxford: Simon and Schuster, 2007.

Sheffer, G. & O. Barak (eds.). *Militarism and Israeli Society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.