

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What Good Is Military Strategy? An Analysis of Strategy and Effectiveness in the First Arab-Israeli War

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What good is military strategy? According to the scholarship on military effectiveness, the answer is “not much”—strategy does not significantly affect the performance of armies in combat. Strategic theory scholarship disagrees and describes four specific mechanisms linking strategy to military effectiveness: Exploiting weaknesses in the adversary’s strategy; causing psychological dislocation in the enemy commanders; creating a favorable center of gravity and pattern of war; and focusing resources and controlling violence in service of political goals. This essay uses a case study from the southern front of the First Arab-Israeli War to explore how strategy affects military performance. We find that Israeli General Yigal Allon’s military strategy significantly increased the combat efficiency and battlefield performance of the Israeli Defense Force, consistent with the mechanisms suggested by strategic theory. These findings suggest that military strategy is indeed an important determinant of military effectiveness.

Keywords: Military strategy; Military Effectiveness; War; Strategy; Arab-Israeli War

Introduction

The study of military effectiveness is one of the most vibrant areas of research in the security studies sub-discipline. For two decades, scholars have documented how “operational practices” determine the military effectiveness of armies (Echevarria 2014: 56). This rich scholarship has greatly advanced the base of knowledge on why some military units perform much better than others. Unfortunately, these achievements have obscured the important role military strategy plays in determining operational effectiveness and overall military performance. Military strategy not only directly affects the success of military operations, it also links tactics and operations with national policy. Without a coherent and explicit military strategy, political goals are unlikely to be met in the military realm through the employment of untethered operational art (see Betts 2004). The lack of attention to the role of military strategy not only narrows our understanding of military effectiveness, it also seriously challenges the importance of strategy overall. If military strategy has no effect on military performance, then what good is military strategy?

To develop our argument, we create an analytical framework for assessing the impact of military strategy on battlefield performance. This framework is built by surveying and categorizing various conceptualizations of military strategy to identify propositions for how strategy effects outcomes in war. These propositions are applied to a case study of the southern front in the First Arab-Israeli War to determine if and how strategy shapes military effectiveness. We begin our analysis by first defining and summarizing the main trends in scholarship on military effectiveness. These first sections demonstrate the operational focus of the scholarship and the lack of attention to the role of military strategy. We then define strategy, develop an analytical framework for understanding how military strategy affects battlefield performance, and apply that framework to the First Arab-Israeli War. Two major operations on the southern front of the 1948 War provide a good case for this analysis because the two sides in the conflict are evenly matched, and there is a clear decision point in the military strategy with distinct alternatives. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our research and the importance of our findings.

Defining Military Effectiveness

Historians, social scientists, and practitioners have produced numerous studies of military and combat effectiveness, identifying a variety of factors that play a role in explaining why some military units fight more effectively than others.¹ Military effectiveness is often characterized as “the capacity to create military power” (Millett, Murray & Watman 1986: 37–71; Brooks 2007: 9; Talmadge 2013: 185; Braithwaite 2018: 1–3). More specifically, “effectiveness tells how well a state can translate ... resources into actual power in war. Effectiveness is the difference between what a state’s raw resources suggest it could potentially do, and what it is actually capable of doing in battle” (Brooks 2007: 3). This explanation suggests that military power is a measure of how well a military force can perform the tasks of combat under a given set of resources. Stephen Biddle (2004: 5–6) describes these tasks of combat as “the ability to destroy hostile forces while preserving one’s own; the ability to take and hold ground; and the time required to do so.” He further disaggregates the offensive and defensive components of military capability or power and defines “offensive military capability as the capacity to destroy the largest possible defensive force over the largest possible territory for the smallest attacker casualties in the least time; defensive military capability is conversely the ability to preserve the largest possible defensive force over the largest possible territory with the greatest attacker casualties for the longest time.” (Biddle 2004: 5–6).

Drawing on these scholars, we define military effectiveness as the ability to create military power, measured as relative combat efficiency. The central aspect of combat efficiency is the ability to expeditiously inflict relative destruction. To have more military power than an adversary (and thus to have higher military effectiveness), a military force must incapacitate more of the opposing force, more quickly and over a larger area than the opponent.

Operational Practices and Military Effectiveness

Since the publication of Stephen Biddle’s *Military Power* (2004), tactical and operational efficiency (labelled by Biddle as the “modern system”) has become the leading explanation for military and combat effectiveness. The main trend in the military effectiveness scholarship is expanding on and refining Biddle’s (2004) basic argument that that military forces well-trained in the modern system of military tactics and operations are likely to be highly effective fighting forces. For example, Caitlin Talmadge and others use a broader concept of “military practices” that extends beyond pure tactics and operations to also include the promotion and communication practices of military organizations as additional determinants of battlefield effectiveness. For Talmadge (2015: 1), “promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management in the military serve as the critical link between state resources and battlefield power.” When states implement these practices, “battlefield effectiveness is usually the result.” (Talmadge 2015: 1). This description of elements of effectiveness match what Echevarria (2014: 56) more accurately calls “operational practices” or the “the planning of military operations and campaigns and everything that supports it” along with “the broader operational functions of intelligence, deployment, maneuver, sustainment, and command and control; and the development of operational doctrine.” Regardless of labels, most of the leading work on military effectiveness focuses on the “skill” component of military performance. However, this has been shown to be only part of the analytical story.

Skillful implementation of best military practices is certainly crucial to combat effectiveness, but does not seem to tell us much about combat motivation, or what Carl von Clausewitz’s translators call “moral powers,” “moral strength,” “moral factors,” “moral elements,” and “moral qualities” (Clausewitz 1832/1984: 111, 127, 184). Moral strength is the will to fight and win signified by confidence, determination, and commitment to the collective cause.

Contemporary scholarship has developed theories of social and task cohesion which suggest that moral strength comes from the desire of combatants to fight for each other and to succeed in the shared mission (see MacCoun, Kier & Belkin 2006: 646–654; Wong 2006: 659–663; Castillo 2014; King 2016: 699–728). The study of moral strength shifts our attention from “skill” to “will” factors, but keeps us rooted in operational practices (Braithwaite 2018).

Military strategy is likely to affect both skill and will factors. If strategy can place a military force in an advantageous position, it should act as a force multiplier enabling the successful employment of the modern system of tactics and operations, at the same time boosting the confidence of the troops. Thus, contrary to the prevailing scholarly opinion, there is good reason to believe that military strategy contributes significantly to military effectiveness. To provide evidence in support of this contention, the causal links between strategy and effectiveness must be identified which in turn requires clearly defining military strategy.

¹ We treat military effectiveness and combat effectiveness as synonymous because we view the tactical, operational, and strategic levels as being interconnected and do not see any analytical reason for distinguishing between combat and military effectiveness for the purposes of this study. Other scholars may find the need to make a clear distinction.

Defining Military Strategy

Scholars and practitioners provide a multiplicity of definitions of strategy and military strategy (many equate the two). Richard Betts (2004: 6) defines strategy “as a plan for using military means to achieve political ends.” Betts (2004: 6) goes on to define the purpose of strategy: “To devise a rational scheme to achieve an objective through combat or the threat of it; implement the scheme with forces; keep the plan working in the face of enemy reactions (which should be anticipated in the plan); and achieve something close to the objective.” In his most recent book, Colin Gray (2015: 24–25) uses the “common military focus of the term” and defines strategy (or “strategy bridge”) as that which “serves to connect purposefully a polity’s military assets with its political wishes, which is to say its policy.” Both draw on the classic definition of military strategy as the “use of engagements for the object of war” (Clausewitz 1832/1984: 128, 181).

These definitions are useful for describing what strategy does, but they lack a clear sense of what exactly a strategy is. How do we know a strategy when we see it? How can we judge its quality before it is implemented? Betts (2004) defines strategy as a “plan” and a “rational scheme”, but a strategy seems to be more than just a plan (list of actions to take) and the phrase rational scheme is too vague to be analytically useful. Gray’s (2015) definition tells us what strategy does, but not what it is. A different definition gives a more precise and useful meaning: A strategy is a theory of success (Meiser 2016–2017). A military strategy is a theory of military success, and military success is defined by political goals, often simply called policy. Defining strategy as a theory gives some analytical leverage in evaluating strategies and some creative guidance in developing strategy. If we define a theory as a “statement ... predicting which actions will lead to what results—and why” (Christensen & Raynor 2003: 68) or simply as “a causal explanation” (Walt 2005: 26), then a military strategy must provide an explanation of how the use of military force is going to cause preferred policy outcomes to occur. This definition focuses the strategist’s mind on how prescribed actions (the theory’s variables) will create desired effects or cause desired outcomes. A military strategy can be judged by its internal logic and, to some degree, it can be tested against historical cases, computer simulations, war games, and other methods.

In sum, a military strategy is a theory of the successful use of military capabilities to achieve political goals. To align this definition with the scholarship on military effectiveness, a military strategy is a theory of how to create military power (or relative combat efficiency) and use that power to achieve political goals.

Strategy and Military Effectiveness

Despite its seemingly obvious importance, the relationship between military effectiveness and military strategy is relatively unexplored. In the introduction to a widely cited edited volume on military effectiveness, Risa Brooks (2007) describes a “causal chain of military effectiveness”, including eighteen factors that determine military effectiveness. Strategy is conspicuously absent from that list. The closest factors are “strategic assessment” and “strategic command and control” (Brooks 2007: 9). Brooks (2007: 14, 19, 22) mentions the importance of strategy in passing, but does not explain how and why it affects military effectiveness. Other studies have attempted to link types of strategy with conflict outcomes, but none of these studies examine whether or how strategy is a determinant of battlefield performance (Sullivan 2012; Arreguin-Toft 2005; Pape 1996).

This section draws on the strategic theory literature to discuss and synthesize arguments about the causal effects of military strategy. There are different views among strategic theorists on how strategy matters, but the most applicable set of arguments is rooted in understanding the purpose of military strategy as the search for sources of relative power advantage. This approach to military strategy fits well with our definition of military effectiveness as the ability to create military power.

Lawrence Freedman (2013: xii) defines strategy as “the art of creating power”, and Richard Rumelt (2011: 21–32) sees the “discovery of power” as the core attribute of good strategy. Rumelt (2011) sees strategy-making as a process of finding advantages by pitting your strength against an opponent’s weakness. He gives the example of David and Goliath. David is very aware of his own weaknesses and Goliath’s strengths, but then moves beyond that apparent disadvantage to discover a source of power based on his less apparent capabilities (skill with a slingshot) and Goliath’s weaknesses (lack of head protection) (Rumelt 2011: 22). Freedman (2013) and Rumelt (2011) make a crucial connection between strategy and power which suggests a useful intervention point in the scholarship on military effectiveness. If military strategy can be shown to create or enhance military power, then its importance to the study of military performance should be obvious.

While Freedman’s (2013) and Rumelt’s (2011) perspectives provide a useful starting point, they do not identify specific sources of military power. Fortunately, strategic theorists do provide guidance in understanding

how military strategy can provide a competitive advantage in war. First, Sun Tzu (1971: 77) argues in favor of creating a strategy based on an analysis of the weaknesses of the adversary's strategy: "What is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy." One side gains an advantage by identifying a flaw in the opponent's strategy and exploiting that flaw. In this way, one side creates relative military power by exploiting a weakness in the adversary. In more contemporary terms, Sun Tzu is suggesting a path to success by denying victory to your adversary (Pape 1996). If this mechanism of relative power creation is present, an analyst would expect to see one side identifying the strategy of its adversary, finding weaknesses, and then implementing an appropriate counter-strategy to exploit these weaknesses. The analyst would expect to find evidence of actions taken that are consistent with the counter-strategy and would expect those actions to increase the battlefield performance of the side implementing the counter-strategy.

A second way strategy can produce military power, also suggested by Sun Tzu, is through deception and psychological manipulation (Tzu 1971; Yuen 2014). This approach is fundamental to Giulio Douhet's air power theory, J.F.C. Fuller's mechanized warfare, B.H. Liddell Hart's indirect approach, and John Boyd's conceptualization of maneuver warfare (Freedman 2013: 123–139, 198–201). Of these theorist-practitioners, Hart and Boyd provide the best linkage between military strategy and military effectiveness. For Hart, creating "dislocation and exploitation" are the core goals of military strategy (Hart 1991: 336, 325–326). Boyd's concept of maneuver warfare, articulated in the Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting*, extends Hart's approach: "The goal is to attack the enemy 'system'—to incapacitate the enemy systemically." (USMC 1997: 37–38). The way of producing this incapacitation is to use "speed and surprise" to concentrate strength "against selected enemy weakness in order to maximize advantage" (Brown 2018: 150–179). Hart (1991: 326) lists several ways a force can cause dislocation, including unexpectedly changing the direction of attack, dividing the adversary's forces, putting supply lines in jeopardy, and threatening to cut off avenues of retreat to safe territory. If this mechanism of power creation is present, the analyst should expect to find evidence of a strategy based on producing psychological dislocation within the enemy force and using deception, speed, and concentrated violence at critical nodes in the enemy system. The analyst would also expect to see this strategy implemented through operations that do, in fact, cause surprise and psychological dislocation for the adversary.

Third, strategists can create an advantage by identifying and manipulating the central characteristics of the war. According to Clausewitz (1832/1984), "the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking ...". This line of argument is best expressed in J.C. Wylie's (2014: 77–78) strategic theory: "The primary aim of the strategist in the conduct of war is some selected degree of control of the enemy for the strategist's own purpose; this is achieved by control of the pattern of war; and this control of the pattern of war is had by manipulation of the center of gravity of war to the advantage of the strategist and the disadvantage of the opponent." Going beyond Clausewitz's (1832/1984) advice to understand the kind of war, Wylie's (2014) suggests the main purpose of strategy is to manipulate the kind of war being fought. Wylie's (2014) examples suggest that determining the time and location of the fighting is key to exploiting an adversary's vulnerabilities and forcing them to react and fight on terms dictated by the protagonist. Relative military power is created by controlling the pattern of war in terms of how, where, and when engagements are fought. If this mechanism of power creation is present, the analyst should expect to find evidence of a strategy seeking to exert control over the kind of war begin fought by shifting the terms of combat to a time, place, and type disadvantageous to the adversary. Furthermore, evidence should be present that is suggesting success in dictating the favorable pattern of war identified in the strategy.

Finally, the core function of strategy is to focus, prioritize, and coordinate resources and action (Rumelt 2011: 76–104; Brands 2014: 7–9; Freedman 2013: ix–xii; Hoffman 2014: 479–480). Military strategy increases violence efficiency by bringing focus to the use of military power by defining the goals and how they should be achieved. Military strategy also allows a commander to coordinate forces across time and space, whether along a front, within a theater, or around the globe, to create and maintain coherence of action. As Clausewitz (1832/1984) explains, violence untethered from strategy and policy achieves nothing except the perpetuation of violence. For war to maintain a rational basis, violence must serve policy, as articulated through military strategy (Clausewitz 1832/1984: 75–89). A tight linkage of military strategy, operational practice, and tactics is therefore necessary to maximize military effectiveness. No matter how well a military force employs Biddle's (2004) modern system of tactics and operations, its efforts will be wasted if their actions are not directly linked to the overarching military strategy. By focusing the resources, military strategy creates military power. If this mechanism of power creation is present, the analyst should

expect to find evidence of clear continuity between policy, strategy, operations, and tactics. The operational and tactical choices should flow directly from the overarching military strategy which should provide the theory for how the goals of policy should be achieved by the use of violent force. Military strategy should discipline the use of military power and increase violence efficiency by focusing and prioritizing the use of military power.

The above discussion results in an analytical framework with the following propositions.

Military strategy increases relative military power by:

- exploiting weaknesses in the adversary's strategy to cause failure of their theory or success,
- using deception, speed, and concentrated violence to cause psychological dislocation within the adversary's force,
- determining how, where, and when engagements are fought to dictate a favorable pattern of war to exert some level of control over the adversary,
- focusing, prioritizing, and coordinating resources and action by linking operational practice to policy.

All the propositions are phrased in a cause-and-effect manner, consistent with our definition of strategy as a theory (causal explanation) of success. All the propositions focus on increasing the ability of a force to expeditiously inflict relative destruction on an adversary. The first three propositions apply to decreasing the adversary's combat efficiency, while the fourth increases the protagonist combat efficiency. The elements of the framework are not mutually exclusive, in fact, they are likely to be grouped together and may have a multiplicative effect. The propositions are not meant to be exhaustive, but should capture the most significant ways military strategy affects military performance. The next section of this essay applies this framework to the IDF's military strategy against the Egyptian Army in the southern theater of the First Arab-Israeli War.

Strategy and Military Effectiveness in the First Arab-Israeli War

The analytical framework developed above identifies plausible ways military strategy can affect military performance. In this section, the framework is applied to two case studies of Israeli strategy during the First Arab-Israeli War to test the effects of military strategy. First, we provide a brief description of the causes and early stages of the First Arab-Israeli War. Next, we analyze the military strategy developed and employed by General Yigal Allon in the southern theater of war in Operations Yoav and Horev, paying close attention to the elements of our military strategy framework which are present in these cases.

Early Stages of the First Arab-Israeli War

On May 14, 1948, Jewish leader David Ben-Gurion officially established the state of Israel. The basis for this declaration was "UN Resolution 181 (II). Future Government of Palestine", adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 29, 1947. The resolution partitioned the British Mandate of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. The Yishuv (Jewish residents of Palestine), represented by the Jewish Agency, generally accepted the partition of the land without agreeing to specific borders, but the Arab Palestinians rejected any partition. For its part, Great Britain refused to cooperate with the UN or in any way help prepare Palestine for partition and set a unilateral withdrawal date of May 15, 1948. Arab militias responded to the UN vote by attacking Jewish communities in Palestine. The violence between the Yishuv and Arab Palestinians resulted in hundreds of thousands of Arabs fleeing their homes in Palestine, many seeking to escape the violence and many more expelled by the *Haganah* (the precursor to the Israeli Defense Force or IDF) in a campaign to secure more land for the emergent Jewish state (Bunton 2013: chapter 3, chapter 4; Bregman 2016: 11–21; Tal 2004a: 887–888, 900).

The communal violence of 1947 and early 1948 was replaced by regular combat operations of an interstate war on May 15, 1948, when Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq attacked Israel (with additional small contributions from Saudi Arabia and Yemen and aided by irregular combatants). The three main areas of fighting were (1) in the north against Syrian and Iraqi forces, (2) in the south against Egyptian forces, and (3) around Jerusalem against Transjordan and Arab League forces. Only the Egyptian Expeditionary Force occupied a significant amount of land designated for the Jewish state by the UN. While the IDF was relatively successful on the defense, Israeli forces failed to conduct any major offensive operations against the regular Arab state forces until October of 1948. Offensive operations were crucial to the core Israeli political goals

of removing the Arab coalition forces from Palestine and establishing secure borders for the state of Israel (Tal 2004a: 890–984; Bregman 2016: 27–32). The primary impediment to achieving these goals was the EEF.

The Southern Front

When Egypt entered the war, they sent between 5,500 and 10,000 troops into Palestine commanded by Major General Ahmed Ali al-Mwawi (Pollack 2004: 15–16; Tal 2004b: 374–375). The Egyptian Expeditionary Force split up into two columns, of which the stronger proceeded up the coast of the Mediterranean towards Tel Aviv, while the other continued into the Negev and then north toward Jerusalem. After trading blows with the Israelis through the summer of 1948, the Egyptians eventually settled into a defensive line running west to east along the Majdal-Beit Jibrin Road.² The EEF manned their line with three long, narrow strips of troops stretching across the width of the Negev in order to cut it off from the rest of Israel (Tal 2004b: 374–375). While the first column of Egyptian troops got bogged down as they advanced past Gaza toward Tel Aviv, IDF leaders debated plans to eliminate the Egyptian forces from the Negev and regain the lost territory. It was a widespread belief among Israelis that if the line carved into the desert by the EEF were to become the perpetual border for the Jewish people, they would be left vulnerable to future Arab incursions. Therefore, Prime and Defense Minister Ben-Gurion and his commanders focused on the destruction or removal of Egyptians forces from Palestine (Morris 2009: 320–321, 350–358).

Strategic Choice

In response to the strategic situation at the southern front, two distinct schools of thought emerged from the minds of IDF commanders Shimon Avidan and Yigal Allon. Avidan proposed “a strategy of direct attack and a battle of annihilation” (Tal 2004a: 897) meant to destroy the EEF in a frontal assault on all Egyptian defensive positions in the Negev. This was the same strategy he unsuccessfully attempted in May of 1948, during Operation Pleshet. Despite its previous failure, Avidan placed his faith in his strategy and recommended it to Ben-Gurion in October 1948. Allon’s alternative was “an indirect approach of breaking up enemy formations and taking advantage of their weak links” (Tal 2004a: 897–898). This strategy involved exploiting the weak points in the Egyptians’ defensive line and its lack of depth. Rather than attack Egyptian strongpoints head-on, Allon wanted to divide and envelop the Egyptian forces and cut off their supply routes and lines of communication. His plan utilized Israel’s advantages in mobility, and initiative, while capitalizing on the Egyptian defense’s static, stretched-out position (Tal 2004a: 900). David Tal (2004a: 903) compares the two commanders’ strategies:

Avidan and Allon, then, represented two contrasting approaches to the principles of warfare: One advocated a direct frontal assault aimed at eliminating the fighting force of the enemy by means of destruction, while the other sought to destroy the enemy’s combat capabilities by striking at its transportation and supply routes, splitting its defenses, and then gradually dealing with “slices.”

Ben-Gurion was now faced with a choice between strategies based on different theories of success. Avidan believed that it would take a direct assault and destruction of Egyptian positions to end the threat at the southern front. Allon believed that the Egyptian position could be made untenable by fragmenting their defensive line and preventing them from fighting as a unified force. The General Staff of the IDF preferred Avidan’s approach of directly annihilating Egyptian forces, but Ben-Gurion chose Allon’s plan. It was a fraught decision because he believed that Israel’s survival depended on the success of this operation, and he knew it had to be carried out swiftly because the UN Security Council would undoubtedly call for another cease-fire in the coming days (Morris 2009: 321; Tal 2004b: 378).

Operation Yoav

Operation Yoav was divided into stages. In the first stage, the plan was to cut the Egyptian Majdal-Beit Jibrin/Majdal-Faluja line with the Harel and Givati Brigades and take advantage of their long supply routes. The IDF would then encircle and defeat the pockets of cut-off Egyptian forces. In subsequent stages, the IDF would move to take other areas occupied by Egyptian forces along the coast in Majdal and Gaza. But before Yoav could begin, Ben-Gurion knew that the IDF must provoke the Egyptians to throw the first punch in order to justify the Israeli attack. On October 15, the IDF sent a supply convoy to their northern Negev settlements, hoping that the Egyptians would continue their practice of firing on the convoys, which was in violation of the current cease-fire agreement. This time, however, the Egyptians offered little response to the convoy and

² The Majdal-Beit road runs east to west approximately half way between Tel Aviv and the border with Egypt.

the Israelis set fire to their own fuel truck in an effort to further provoke the Egyptians. The plan worked as the Egyptians proceeded to deploy half a dozen Spitfires to the Israelis' location, giving the IDF their justification for operation Yoav (Morris 2009: 323). The IDF quickly dispatched their air force, which consisted of a handful of Messerschmitts, Spitfires, B-17s, and other civilian aircraft, to destroy the Egyptian's central air field in El 'Arish, grounding the Egyptian's planes and giving the IDF air superiority. The Egyptians were caught completely off guard and suffered significant losses in the coming air raids (Morris 2009: 323–325; Pollack 2004: 21). In these early stages of the operation, Allon managed to surprise and sow confusion within the EEF, while carefully controlling IDF use of violent force in line with the political goal of portraying the Arab forces as the aggressors.

Between October 15 and 22, 1948, the IDF executed Allon's strategy successfully. The Israelis broke through the Egyptian 4th brigade on the Majdal-Beit Jibrin line and encircled pockets of Egyptian forces as Allon had envisioned, including the Faluja pocket, where over 4,000 Egyptian soldiers were later forced to surrender. The Faluja encirclement was jeopardized when one of Allon's commanders, Yitzhak Sadeh of the 8th Brigade, abandoned the indirect approach and attempted a frontal attack at the village of Iraq al-Manshiyya on October 16. Allon's plan was to surround and cut off the village and then take the position later through night raids. Instead of following through with this approach, Sadeh convinced Allon to allow a frontal assault on the Egyptian position, arguing the Egyptian forces would scatter at the approach of Israeli tanks. However, the Egyptians held firm and the IDF attack was smashed by entrenched Egyptian forces causing the Israelis to retreat. Sadeh's failure forced Allon to improvise and adapt in order to break the Egyptian line and complete the encirclement of EEF strongpoints. IDF operational commander Yigael Yadin argued for another direct attack on Iraq al-Manshiyya to demonstrate "tenacity of purpose", but Yadin allowed Allon to redirect his troops to the east to break through near the village of Huleiqat and cut off Egyptian supply lines, which was successfully executed on October 17 (Tal 2004b: 381–82). The failed assault on Iraq al-Manshiyya stands out as something of a natural experiment, suggesting the choice in strategy was highly consequential for the performance of the IDF during Operation Yoav.

By October 19, the IDF had driven powerful wedges between the western (coastal) and eastern (Hebron Hills) arms of the Egyptian army, effectively isolating the eastern arm and driving a second wedge in between Gaza and Majdal along the coast of the Gaza Strip. These advances "knocked the Egyptian high command off balance" and forced General al-Mwawi to move his headquarters south to avoid capture (Morris 2009: 326; Pollack 2004: 21–22). By October 20, the eastern arm of the EEF was further fragmented and retreated to form another west-east defensive line to the south between Gaza and Beersheba. Al-Mwawi believed the type of war had fundamentally changed from conquering territory for Arab Palestinians to "the defense of the Land of Egypt" (Morris 2009: 327). In the final act of Yoav, Allon took Beersheba, the capital of the Negev. Allon could have chosen to attack Majdal or Gaza on the coast, but instead chose Beersheba to complete the victory against the eastern arm of the EEF and cement Israeli control of the upper Negev (Morris 2009: 327). The units making up the eastern column of the Egyptian forces were either defeated in battle, forced to retreat into Egypt proper or into Gaza, or entrapped in isolated pockets by IDF maneuvers. In one short week, the IDF implemented Allon's strategy with minimal losses, certainly with fewer casualties than would have occurred in a direct frontal assault. In the wake of Operation Yoav, General Mwawi was relieved of command of the EEF (Pollack 2004: 22).

Operation Horev

Though Yoav had been a major success for the Israelis, Egypt still held the Gaza Strip and the Faluja pocket, along with a fortified line south of Beersheba which pressured the central and southern Negev. Moreover, under the second truce, Israel resources were being pushed to the limits and each front posed a major challenge to Israeli leadership. Nearly half of all Israeli men were under arms, rather than aiding in the reconstruction efforts or managing the large numbers of refugees. The Arab nations continued to hold land that was key to Israeli goals. The Syrians held land earmarked as Israeli by the UN partition; the Jordanians and Iraqis remained dug-in on the West Bank, within striking distance of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; and David Ben-Gurion's grim prediction to his ministers on September 26, 1948, that "a protracted truce will break us" remained just as present in December 1948 (Morris 2009: 321).

However, the truce was equally grim for the Egyptians. The EEF entered the war with no clear strategic objective and under the presumption that the other Arab armies would be doing most of the fighting. The failure to move beyond Gaza and the catastrophe of Operation Yoav eroded the will and effectiveness of the EEF (Gerges 2007: 157). Unable to occupy Jewish settlements, the EEF had pursued a strategy of containment: Occupying fixed positions across wide defensive lines to decrease the freedom of movement of the Israelis. However, the forces defending the positions remained immobile and far too spread out,

overextending the EEF (Gerges 2007: 159). All the while, some 4,000 men remained trapped in the Faluja pocket, unable to break out. Cairo was left fearing that the Egyptian army—and the Farouk regime as a whole—would not survive a defeat in Palestine (Morris 2009: 352).

Under these conditions, Israel prepared to extend the success of Yoav and force Egypt out of the Negev and out of the war. By December of 1948, Ben-Gurion decided “only a successful application of force would change the status quo and perhaps jolt the Arab states toward acceptance of Israel, if not actual peace-making.” (Morris 2009: 353). The application of force would be aimed at forcing Egypt out of the Negev. Ben-Gurion set the goal, but the most influential figure in planning and execution of what would be known as Operation Horev, would be General Yigal Allon—the architect behind the Operation Yoav and the Faluja encirclement. Horev would continue his indirect approach designed to exploit Egyptian weaknesses. Benny Morris (2009: 360) noted that “Allon had no intention of ramming his head against the brick wall of Egyptian defenses.”

Horev would open with a diversionary attack on Hill 86 in the West Bank, meant to convince the EEF that the Israelis would attack Gaza head-on. However, the main thrust would push towards Auja, the entrance to the Sinai and Egyptian territory. From Auja, the IDF units would advance north toward Rafah on the coast to cut off EEF units in the Gaza Strip. In a major improvisation, Allon modified the plan to push beyond Auja and drive deep into Egyptian territory, swinging north towards the Mediterranean in a massive encirclement at the city of Arish, putting the entire Sinai Peninsula in peril and trapping two Egyptian brigades (Morris 2009: 359; Tal 2004: 905). Allon believed this maneuver was necessary because the strong EEF defensive position on the Rafah-Gaza line would make any assault on that position very costly. Therefore, instead of attacking an Egyptian strong point, Allon planned for a deep envelopment into the Sinai, cutting off the supply line from Egypt to Gaza (Tal 2004: 905–906). Such an advance would place Israeli troops well within Egyptian territory. Allon neglected to inform his superiors of this part of his strategy, fearing that “political impediments” might rob the IDF of an overwhelming victory (Morris 2009: 362).

Operation Horev began on December 22, 1948. Egyptian intelligence had correctly estimated that the operation would take place between December 20 and 25—but had failed to ascertain whether the Israelis would be attacking Gaza or the Hebron Hills (Morris 2009: 358). Rain canceled several Israeli air raids meant to soften up and harass EEF units, but the 13th Battalion of the Golani Brigade proceeded with the decoy attack against Hill 86 in the early afternoon. The attack proved difficult for the Israelis. After being forced off the hill, the Egyptians returned with an extensive artillery barrage followed up by several counterattacks. Egyptian mechanized infantry attacked Hill 86 in waves, eventually forcing the Israelis to retreat late on December 23 (Morris 2009: 360). The heavy fighting at Hill 86 convinced the Egyptians that the main Israeli thrust would come at Gaza and, in turn, the Egyptians repositioned their forces to accommodate an attack from the north (Morris 2009: 361).

Instead, the main Israeli thrust came to the south against the entrance to the Sinai Peninsula on the night of December 24. Using an abandoned Roman road, the 8th Armored Brigade outflanked Egyptian positions in Asluj (which covered the road to Auja) and swung south (Pollack 2004: 23). Against the Egyptian 1st Infantry Battalion, the Israelis faced a virtually-static enemy with great success. Prior to the battle, the Egyptians had fortified themselves in hilltops unable to support one another (Morris 2009: 361). Benny Morris (2009: 361) referred to the flanking maneuver as “the high point of Allon’s generalship”. Egyptian tanks fought as static artillery pieces and made no attempt to prevent the 8th Armored Brigade’s flanking maneuver. By December 26, the 8th Armored Brigade had seized Auja and killed an Egyptian deputy battalion commander during a counterattack (Morris 2009: 362). They were reinforced by the Negev Brigade and crossed the Egyptian border at noon on December 28. Facing only light resistance, by December 29 the Israelis were within six miles of Arish in Egypt proper (Morris 2009: 365). An EEF battalion commander had been captured during the drive, while the Bir Lahfan airfield twelve miles south of Arish and four Royal Egyptian Air Force planes had been seized. The remaining Egyptian planes which had not been seized were flown to the Suez Canal area, leaving the EEF completely without air cover (Morris 2009: 364; Pollack 2004: 23). The drive on Arish only ended when the Israelis dug in to rest and await reinforcements. By the time the Israelis were ready to renew their attack, Allon had conceded to direct orders from IDF operational commander Yigael Yadin and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to withdraw from the Sinai. Though sporadic fighting continued following the January 2 withdrawal from Egypt, Horev ended Egyptian involvement in the war and forced them to pursue peace (Morris 2009: 365–369; Pollack 2004: 23–24).

The victory of Horev came down to the deficiencies in Egyptian strategy and military performance, in stark contrast to the effectiveness of Israeli strategy and tactics. In terms of equipment and manpower deployed during Horev, the Egyptians either matched or exceeded the Israelis. According to Kenneth Pollack (2004: 27):

In both numbers and quality of operational weapons, there was no time at which Egyptian forces did not have more and better weapons than their opponents, and except during the final Israeli offensives, this superiority was usually very great ... the quality and quantity of weapons that they actually possessed should have been more than adequate to defeat the Israelis had Egyptian tactical formations performed better.

While Egyptian forces were overmatched tactically, their poor performance was largely the result of poor Egyptian military strategy and good Israeli military strategy. The lack of a clear policy and military strategy for Egypt laid the foundation for the tactical deficiencies of the EEF (see Gerges 2007: 157). In contrast, Allon's strategy reshaped the conflict in Israel's favor, significantly increasing Israel's military power through mobility, surprise, and deception (Eshel 2004: 23).

Evaluation

Allon's strategy against the EEF at the southern front of the First Arab-Israeli War displayed all four mechanisms described in our analytical framework. Each mechanism had the predicted effect to either decrease the combat efficiency (and overall performance) of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force or increase the combat efficiency (and overall performance) of the Israeli Defense Force.

First, the Egyptian military strategy was to build a well-fortified defensive line to maintain its control of the Negev, to have something to show for its participation in the war, and to prevent Israel from separating Egypt from the rest of the Arab world. If the IDF attacked the fortified positions along Egyptian defensive lines, the EEF had a reasonable chance of success, especially along the Majdal-Beit Jibrin/Majdal-Faluja line attacked in Operation Yoav. Egyptian forces had performed well when fighting from prepared defensive positions and the IDF was inexperienced at coordinated large unit assaults. Allon attacked Egypt's military strategy by turning its strength into weakness. The EEF held strong points along its line, but its forces were stretched thin. Allon bypassed and encircled the strongest fortifications turning their strength into a liability for Egypt. By encircling major portions of the Egyptian force, the IDF dramatically reduced their combat efficiency. In the most extreme and risky encirclement effort in Operation Horev, Allon's left-hook into the Sinai threatened the existence of the Egyptian Army as a cohesive fighting force. The IDF did not need to destroy the Egyptian force, it simply needed to threaten its supply lines and path of retreat.

Second, Allon used deception, surprise, speed, and concentrated violent force to knock Egyptian commanders off balance and gain rapid advantages across a wide area of operations. In Operation Yoav, the IDF manipulated Egyptian forces into firing the first shot, responding by eliminating the threat of the Royal Egyptian Air Force and quickly breaking through the Egyptian line at multiple points along both the western and eastern arms of the EEF. These actions caused confusion and threatened the EEF headquarters, significantly reducing Egyptian combat efficiency. In Horev, the IDF used deception to convince Egyptian leaders to concentrate their forces near Gaza, helping to open the path to the Sinai and strongly affecting the relative combat power at Auja. The speed and surprise of the assault by the 8th Brigade caused significant confusion and demoralized Egyptian junior officers to the extent that they lied to superiors about counterattacking Israeli forces. By severing lines of communication and encircling major elements of the EEF, the IDF significantly enhanced its relative combat efficiency in operations along the southern front.

Third, by shifting to a war of movement, Allon moved the center of gravity to Egyptian held territory and then to Egypt proper. By breaking through the EEF lines, the IDF threatened Egyptian territory, changing the character of the war. After Yoav, and especially Horev, the conflict for Egypt was no longer a war of conquest, but instead a war to preserve the Egyptian army, regime, and territory. In creating a pattern of war characterized by Egyptian shock, demoralization, and retreat, the IDF exercised a degree of control, forcing the EEF to react to Israeli moves. In changing the center of gravity and pattern of the war, Allon's strategy undermined the cohesion and morale of the EEF, significantly degrading its military power.

Fourth, Allon's military strategy aligned with Israeli policy, focusing and coordinating the efforts of the IDF on threatening the western arm of the EEF and rapidly disintegrating the eastern arm of the EEF, in order to establish de facto Israeli control of the Negev. The focusing mechanism is most clearly on display in Operation Yoav, where Allon achieved his goals over the necessary time window of seven days and in

a manner that was consistent with the Israeli goal of portraying the Arab states as the aggressors. Most importantly, Allon's strategy removed the EEF from the main portions of the Negev without engaging in a drawn-out war of attrition.

Operation Horev also achieved Israel's central goal of expelling Egypt from the Negev, but at significant political cost and in a manner at odds with the policy defined by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion. Allon's strategy consistently secured the coordination of forces across the southern front. Both Yoav and Horev required coordinated action along the front to enable the use of deception and surprise. By directly linking combat operations with policy, Allon was able to maximize the efficiency of IDF combat power at the southern front.

Counterarguments

Military strategy is not the only plausible explanation for the IDF's success at the southern front. An alternative interpretation by Kenneth Pollack (2004: 24–27) suggests that tactical deficiencies explain the low military effectiveness of Egyptian forces. This explanation is directly in line with the dominant scholarship explaining military effectiveness by relative advances in operational practices. However, Pollack (2004) ignores the possibility that the poor tactical performance may have been caused by the strategic advantage of the IDF. Once their initial offensive was halted, Egyptian commanders failed to use military strategy to enhance or create relative combat efficiency. There was no apparent effort to identify and exploit weaknesses in IDF strategy or sow confusion or use deception to weaken Israeli forces. Egyptian forces did not have a strategy for maintaining control of the center of gravity or pattern of war and seemed to lack any clear policy that could focus Egyptian efforts beyond simply holding territory.

Others may argue that the Egyptian forces were overmatched by the IDF in terms of physical or moral factors. The comparison of men and materiel suggests that the EEF was not at a disadvantage with respect to numbers of soldiers, vehicles, or aircraft. According to Pollack (2004: 27), "there was no time at which Egyptian forces did not have more and better weapons than their opponents." While the number of soldiers on both sides of the southern front fluctuated throughout the war, during Operation Yoav both sides fielded approximately four infantry brigades, each supported by two armored battalions, and three artillery/mortar battalions. The Egyptians were also supported by various irregular auxiliaries (Morris 2009: 320–322; Tal 2004b: 373–379).

During Operation Horev, Israel "deployed elements of five brigades and large auxiliary formations" which amounted to approximately 11 infantry battalions, supported by Home Guard battalions and "several artillery battalions" (Morris 2009: 358). The Egyptians deployed approximately 15 infantry battalions supported by armor, artillery, and auxiliary battalions (Morris 2009: 358). Airpower on both sides was rudimentary and is not seen as contributing significantly to the performance by either side (Morris 2009: 325). If we trust Pollack's (2004) assessment of the weapon systems fielded by both sides, it appears that, if anything, the IDF suffered a qualitative and quantitative disadvantage in both operations. Furthermore, the EEF was on the defensive in both operations, which is usually credited as giving something close to a 3-to-1 advantage for the defenders (Mearsheimer 1989).

The moral factor is more difficult to assess, but most accounts suggest Egyptian units fought with determination and courage, especially when fighting from prepared defensive positions (Morris 2009: 328; Tal 2004b: 381; Pollack 2004: 24). Though they had little combat experience prior to the war, the Egyptian Expeditionary Force was trained and equipped by the British to be a regular army competent in conventional operational practices (Aloni 2001: 18–22; Pollack 2004: 14–15). The IDF was "highly motivated", and the Israelis were experienced fighters, but their experience came mainly from irregular warfare against Palestinian and Arab militias (Pollack 2004: 15; Eshel 2004: 21). Even the experienced IDF commanders were unpracticed in large unit conventional warfare (Tal 2004a: 888–890). Furthermore, the diverse cultural backgrounds of the Israeli soldiers meant that entire units did not speak the same language, forcing commanders to issue orders through interpreters, which likely reduced the cohesion (Eshel 2004: 14). In sum, it appears advantages in numbers of soldiers, level of technological sophistication of weapon systems, and level of resolve do not offer a convincing explanation of the superior performance of the IDF at the southern front of the First Arab-Israeli War.

Conclusion

What good is military strategy? In this essay, we argue that military strategy creates and enhances combat efficiency through four specific mechanisms: Exploiting weaknesses in the adversary's strategy; causing psychological dislocation in the enemy commanders; creating a favorable center of gravity and pattern of war;

and focusing resources and controlling violence in service of political goals. Our case study of the Israeli Defense Force at the southern front of the First Arab-Israeli War suggests that our argument has some merit. Yigal Allon's military strategy for expelling the Egyptian Expeditionary Force from Palestine utilized all four mechanisms and, in doing so, significantly enhanced the relative combat efficiency of the IDF. These findings are significant, but also call for additional research. Moving forward, it is important to continue to develop the precise mechanisms through which strategy increases effectiveness. We identify four mechanisms, but believe that more are likely to be uncovered by additional research. Strategic theory provides a vast store of knowledge that certainly holds more insights into the connections between strategy and military performance.

Our findings lead to two main implications. First, the study of military strategy and military effectiveness should be better linked. On the one hand, scholars of strategic studies (mainly military historians and strategic theorists) generally assume that strategy affects military performance and outcomes in war, but rarely take the time to explain exactly how strategy impacts military effectiveness and shapes outcomes. If military strategy has no effect on military effectiveness, then strategy does not matter. Therefore, it is contingent upon strategic studies scholars to make this linkage explicit. On the other hand, scholars of security studies are focused on operational practices and do not typically consider how military strategy conditions the effectiveness of those operational practices. One reason why strategy is not emphasized in recent studies is the difficulty in identifying the causal mechanisms linking military strategy to combat effectiveness. This essay proposes specific ways in which military strategy directly affects combat effectiveness. We believe this innovative thinking opens new avenues for research on military effectiveness, outcomes in war, and the importance of good military strategy. Indeed, we expect future studies will find that many outcomes attributed to operational practices should instead be attributed to strategy.

The second implication is the need to focus more attention on military strategy as a concept and a causal factor. Much of the scholarship on strategy emphasizes grand or national strategy and therefore misses the importance of military strategy. At the same time, military strategy has been overshadowed by the study of operational practices. While the concept of military strategy has been neglected, it has also been subject to a frontal attack by recent scholarship, arguing that decisive battle is a myth and most wars are won by simply wearing down the opposing side (Nolan 2017; Nolan 2019). Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, military strategy matters little. Instead, the most important factors are deciding *when* and *where* to fight and then the mobilization of more resources than your opponent. Yet this approach is limited by the simplistic view of a dichotomous typology of military strategy—it must be either maneuver or attrition. The reality is much more complicated. Even attrition requires a strategy of how to achieve the necessary reduction in enemy forces, and how that reduction in forces will result in the realization of national policy.

Military strategy is a vital concept in the study of war because of its crucial role in linking what armies do on the battlefield to national policy. Without a coherent and explicit military strategy, national goals are unlikely to be met through the threat or use of combat. Military strategy is the theory of how violence will be used to achieve policy. When scholars ignore military strategy, the explanations are incomplete and the conclusions are weak. When practitioners ignore military strategy, combat power is limited, performance is poor, and achievements unimpressive.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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