



PERSPECTIVES

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Improving Israeli Military Strategy Through *Avant Garde* Analysis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In strategic studies, just as in art, music, or literature, *avant garde* means an imaginative willingness to take conceptual leaps. There are several ways in which Israeli strategic studies could benefit from the creativity of an explicitly *avant garde* orientation.

One normally thinks of the *avant garde* with reference to artistic exploration, but it can also be applied to other fields of human learning, including military strategy. A French expression, it is by its very nature activist, and suggests in any context the energizing idea of "marching forward." This idea represents a continuously dynamic and creative process. *Avant garde*, therefore, is never merely a static endpoint of accumulated facts nor the fully fashioned product of some already concluded inquiry.

In both art and literature, the *avant garde's* *raison d'être* has always been a disruption of the status quo, a challenging prod intended to uncover hidden truths. These creative sorts of rebellion have generally tended to leave orthodox political activism to others, and to "change the world" instead by fashioning innovative fusions of intellect and imagination. It is just this cutting-edge form of rebellion that could significantly enrich Israeli strategic studies.

But what does all this "rebellion" truly signify? What sort of creative impulse or *leitmotif* should we seek among strategists who are plainly more comfortable with intricacies of weapons hardware and cyber-technology than with any alleged utilities of Surrealism or Dada? Poets and artists have traditionally focused their efforts on alterations of "high culture." What, exactly, are we asking Israeli strategists to confront and change in their own lines of work?

There is a ready answer. We require an infusion of *avant garde* thinking into Israeli strategic studies in order to broaden our essential understanding of strategic possibilities of both enemy-generated misfortune (e.g., war, terror, genocide), and of corollary possibilities concerning Israeli response (e.g., improved national policy orientations to nuclear deterrence, intelligence/counterintelligence, ballistic missile defense, diplomacy).

When informed by *avant garde* thinking, strategic theories, like abstract theories of art, can become an efficient "net." Those who "cast" imaginatively will likely enjoy a better "catch." This fragile net must then be intricately rewoven and then delicately recast.

Without a markedly more innovative system of strategic theory, the IDF could become unable to conform its critical order of battle to the constantly changing and increasingly lethal correlation of forces now mustering on both the physical and cyber battlefields.

To be sure, not all IDF strategic planning problems are purely theoretical or conceptual. Even where strategic studies do proceed on a sound intellectual foundation – i.e., one that involves dialectical reasoning rather than sterile accumulations of collected data – they still need to be sheltered from the distorting effects of unsound political judgments.

So what needs to be done? Here are some answers:

- Israeli strategists must look at their country's manifestly existential threats and then identify them as the central object and rationale of all their related inquiries. They must, therefore: (a) prepare an unambiguous hierarchy of what is most important to safeguard; and (b) subsequently adhere to these rankings. This is not to suggest any lack of policy flexibility in shifting from one threat problem or region to another, but rather a clear obligation to offer a conceptual determination of applicable risk.
- Israeli strategists must understand that (a) Israel is a system; (b) existential threats confronting Israel are themselves interrelated; and (c) the complex effects of these interrelated threats upon Israel must always be examined together. A good example of what such an understanding must actually entail is the importance of certain prospective "synergies," such as determining the cumulative consequences of Palestinian statehood and Iranian nuclear capacity appearing at more or less the same time.
- Israeli strategists must understand that the entire world arena is best understood as a system, and that any disintegration of power and

authority structures within this wider macro-system will affect the Israeli micro-system. Since the seventeenth century and the Peace of Westphalia (1648), all world politics have been anarchic. Still, anarchy is not the same as chaos, and questions will need to be answered in Tel Aviv about pertinent differences. Although counterintuitive, there are elements of chaos that might be positive for Israel.

- Israeli strategists must begin to acknowledge the diminishing utility of "victory" and "defeat" as meaningful criteria of operational success. In the first place, it will become increasingly difficult or perhaps even impossible to determine in any tangible fashion whether a particular war has been won or lost. In the second place, it will be important to understand the growing discontinuity between alleged victory and genuinely enhanced national security. This is because a national, sub-state, or hybrid adversary may be able to inflict extraordinary harm upon Israel without first defeating the armies of the Jewish State. It is also plausible that Israel will be able to inflict consequential harm upon certain adversaries without first having to defeat their armed forces.
- Israeli strategists must turn away from predictable or mainstream strategic analysis. Such assessments might please their military and political "consumers," but they might be valueless or even counter-productive for vital Israeli policy formulations.
- A principal assumption of current Israeli strategic studies (and of all strategic studies, for that matter) is the core assumption of rationality in enemy calculations. Because the functioning of nuclear deterrence depends upon this assumption, Israeli strategists could turn away from circumstances in which rationality is not expected to operate. The dangerous result could be that those strategists accomplish too little to prepare the political leadership in Jerusalem for increasingly plausible confrontations with irrational enemy states, sub-states, or hybrid proxies.

How might "cutting edge" strategic thinking apply here? One example concerns the need to answer more precisely how to deter non-rational adversaries, including states, sub-state terror organizations, and hybrid adversaries. It will also need to be asked what might be done if certain enemies go from rational to irrational in the midst of a crisis, or from irrationality to madness.

- Israeli strategists must learn to consider actual literature – not just the narrowly technical materials normally generated by professional (academic and military) strategists, but the authentically creative and

artistic product of writers, poets, and playwrights. The broadly intellectual insights that can be gleaned from real literature can provide a fundamentally better source of strategic understanding than the visually impressive, but often misleading, matrixes, mathematics, metaphors, and "hard" scenarios of military experts. This observation extends, of course, not only to Israel, but to all major national military forces.

- True erudition must finally be given pride of place in strategic studies. Perhaps the most obvious example of an academic discipline enriched by serious literature is psychology. Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Sophocles, Nietzsche, Heine, and E.T.A. Hoffman are just a few of the prominent writers and thinkers who figured importantly in the creation of Sigmund Freud's still unparalleled intellectual opus.
- Israeli strategists need to better understand the occasional advantages of private as opposed to collective thought. They should recall Aristotle's early view: "Deception occurs to a greater extent when we are investigating with others than by ourselves, for an investigation with someone else is carried on quite as much by means of the thing itself." There is a suitable time for collaborative or "team" investigation, but in matters concerning Israeli security, we can find great conceptual value in the private musings of talented individuals.
- Israeli strategists need to reopen, and with greater diligence and insight, the question of nuclear ambiguity. It must be understood that examining the "bomb in the basement" is not merely a matter of belaboring the obvious, but rather of optimally exploiting appropriate levels of nuclear disclosure for purposes of enhanced nuclear deterrence and, quite possibly, non-nuclear preemptions. How can this be accomplished from an *avant garde* point of view?
- Israeli strategists must widen their consideration of broader national questions of nuclear weapons and national strategy. This should be done in concert with all the above-listed strategic studies requirements. Key issues will be nuclear targeting doctrine and ballistic missile defense. Corollary concerns should center on investigations of a refined "Samson" doctrine.
- Israeli strategists must stop contemplating a genuine end to national existence in a purely dispassionate or "objective" manner. Right now, it appears that these strategists can contemplate the literal end of Israel in their formal studies and yet still persevere calmly in their routine day-to-day affairs. This ironic and potentially counterproductive juxtaposition

would no longer obtain if these scholars began to contemplate the actual moment of Israel's disappearance. Sometimes, even science needs a personal conceptual "push.

- Israeli strategists should pay special attention to the requirements of scholarly audacity – that is, of seeking, self-consciously, to avoid the comfortable intellectual middle ground. Individual strategists will need to take risks, both personal and professional, if they are to find serious policy answers to vital strategic questions. This will require courage.

From the beginning, Israelis have exhibited remarkable and even unique levels of personal bravery in war. As yet, however, there have been fewer examples of bravery in Israeli strategic scholarship. For the most part, this scholarship has been narrowly technical, and too often imitative of its American antecedents.

To best implement the expected utilities of an *avant garde* orientation, Israeli strategists are urged to heed these suggestions. In each, there is considerable room for creative personal interpretation and application. By definition, the *avant garde* not only tolerates imaginative thinking – it demands it.

Louis René Beres is Emeritus Professor of International Law at Purdue and the author of twelve books and several hundred articles on nuclear strategy and nuclear war. His newest book is Surviving Amid Chaos: Israel's Nuclear Strategy (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

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