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The Formative Years: 1949–1956

At about 4:00 P.M. on Friday, May 14, 1948, Israel proclaimed its independence. During its first twenty-four hours, the Jewish state was recognized by the United States and the Soviet Union and invaded by the armies of five Arab states. For the next eight months the focus of Israeli attention was the Arab invasion. The strategic concepts that emerged were designed to deal with the immediate situation at hand. The armed forces, which hastily came into existence, were tailored to immediate needs. Weapons were purchased haphazardly by stealth and deceit, from government depots and from private merchants of death according to availability rather than to any coherent concept of requirements. The question was not how to win the war but, at least during the first three months, how not to lose it.

The war ended early in 1949, with mixed results. A decisive victory was obtained over Lebanon. The Lebanese lost all appetite for further fighting while the Israelis held a small portion of southern Lebanon. The war also ended with a virtual rout of the Egyptian army. A small contingent of Egyptians still held on tenaciously to an enclave in the middle of the Israeli-controlled Negev Desert. But the IDF had captured portions of the Egyptian Sinai and were stopped from advancing deeper into Egyptian territory only by British and U.S. threats underlined by actual British involvement in the fighting on the side of Egypt.

The situation on the Syrian and Jordanian fronts, however, was different. The Syrian army succeeded in capturing three minuscule parts of the Galilee, Israel's northern region, and all Israeli attempts to dislodge the Syrians were unsuccessful. Ultimately Israel could perhaps win this contest, but it would mean prolonging the war and risking friction with great powers such as France and the United States. So Israel turned to diplomacy, involving both inducements and some veiled threats, as the chief means of attempting to force the Syrians out.

The situation on the Jordanian front was to a certain extent similar. Jordan, like Syria, did not lose the war. In fact the Arab Legion—as the British-commanded army of the Kingdom of Transjordan was then called—denied the IDF victory wherever the two armies clashed. Thus by the end of the war, Jordanian forces controlled most of the areas west of the Jordan River that the

U.N. Partition Resolution of November 1947 had allotted for a Palestinian Arab state. Although some Israelis viewed this situation as both a calamity of historic proportions and an unmitigated strategic disaster, the unchallenged leader of the Jewish state in the course of the war, head of the provisional government David Ben Gurion, was basically inclined to accept this outcome. Insisting that Israel should retain control at least over parts of Jerusalem, he was inclined to believe that Jordanian control over what otherwise would be a Palestinian state would save Israel from both domestic and international pressures that it would find virtually impossible to withstand. Informed by such a definition of the situation at hand, Ben Gurion warded off the pressures of some of his lieutenants and of some of his political opponents and gradually inched Israel toward acceptance of Jordanian control over Judea and Samaria. For the next nineteen years (1949–67), these areas would be referred to as the West Bank of the Kingdom of Jordan.[1]

As far as can be judged, Ben Gurion's ultimate design was to forge a peace treaty with Jordan on the basis of the cease-fire lines at the end of the 1948 war. This would break up irreparably the already-tattering Arab coalition while stifling the clamor of the Palestinian Arabs for independence under the (then) seemingly imposing structure of a British-supported Jordanian-Palestinian state.[2] Logical as it may have seemed at the time, the Ben Gurion–Abdullah design was ultimately thwarted by the latter's Palestinian Arab opponents. King Abdullah was assassinated by a Palestinian sent by the king's arch enemy, the grand mufti of Jerusalem. The armistice agreements negotiated between Israel, on the one hand, and Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, on the other hand, during the spring and summer of 1949, which were supposed to be a major step toward peace, became instead a means by which the Arabs could gain time while engaging Israel in a military, economic, and political war of attrition. Simultaneously the Arabs were preparing for what they called a second round (the 1948 war being the first round in this match). In fact, the agreements merely obliged Israel to accept the authority of a U.N. Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), without imparting to this body a corresponding ability to restrain Israel's adversaries.[3]

The unraveling of the armistice and the dashing of Israel's anticipation of a quick transition from a state of war to a state of peace caused both chagrin and alarm—all the more so since it took place against the background of adverse international developments from the Israeli point of view. Specifically, the most important change taking place during the 1949–56 period was the decline of British and French status in the Middle East and the gradual replacement of their historic rivalry by the global East–West conflict.[4]

Initially this epochal process worked in Israel's favor, as was dramatically illustrated by the instant recognition of the new state by both superpowers at the very moment in which they were heading to the brink of war in what came to be known as the Berlin crisis. Before long, however, the evolving cold war interjected into the Middle East a superpower race for Arab favor. From this point of view it was no accident that the polarizing global conflict coincided with the gradual collapse of the Israeli–Arab armistice regime. After all, Israel's adversaries were clearly unwilling to make peace even when military defeat seemed to have conclusively proved their inability to stand up to the Jewish state. The evidence of U.S.–Soviet rivalry over Arab friendship must have therefore reinforced the Arabs' conviction that denying Israel peace, and even accelerating the preparations for another war, did not carry with it any intolerable international penalty.

If mounting Arab hostility on the one hand and international isolation on the other were two critical determinants of Israeli strategy during its formative years, the Jewish state's domestic weakness was a third important factor. At independence Israel had a population of 600,000 Jews, but within the period under discussion this number more than doubled. The balance of nearly a million new citizens was made up of immigrants from eastern and central Europe, from the Middle East, and from North Africa.[5]

Broadly speaking, the existing political and social structure that the Jewish state inherited from the Yishuv—the organized Jewish community in Palestine under the British Mandate—was extraordinarily flexible and proved eminently capable of absorbing the newcomers. But although the spectacular increase in the state's population was a boon in the long run, it inescapably weakened the new nation in the short run. The postindependence new immigrants, unlike a significant portion of those who had come before World War II, had not arrived out of choice and ideological motivation. Rather, they were for the most part immigrants of necessity, uprooted refugees who came because they had nowhere else to go. Their professional and occupational preparation for life in the new country had been minimal. Most of them had come from urban centers, whereas Israel's first national priority in the early 1950s was, to use the slogan of that time, "From Town to Country." These immigrants came to a country that was just emerging from a war that had taken a toll of nearly one percent of the population and had cost more than the budget of a whole fiscal year. They were housed in tents and tin shacks within poverty-stricken compounds run by impatient and often insensitive and condescending government officials. They were transferred from place to place, humiliated, bossed around, and then settled in locations that might have seemed logical in the overall planning scheme but could not possibly have made much sense to the bewildered immigrants themselves. For them, the concept of an independent Jewish state may well have become associated with unemployment, austerity, bureaucracy, an inordinate degree of government intervention in daily life, black marketeering—and with consequent alienation, deprivation, disorientation, and demoralization: in fact, with all the ingredients of both personal and collective insecurity.[6]

Such were, broadly speaking, the background conditions, the psychological and operational environments, in which Israeli strategic-political thinking began

to take shape. It was with such perceptions of the dangers at home and abroad that all decisions were made relating to military capabilities, threats and commitments, external alignments, and the use of force. These conditions led initially to a strategic concept emphasizing defense rather than deterrence. Then, as the external noose seemed to be tightening, as the arms race took its course, as technology on the one hand and fear of a domestic crisis on the other forced Israeli decision makers to take stock of their policies, the emphasis increasingly tilted toward deterrence. The details of this learning process shed light not only on the evolution of Israeli strategic thinking but, arguably, also on some of the most intricate problems, choices, and strategic dilemmas that any nation in adversity is forced to face.

Capabilities: Manpower, Firepower, and Deployment

In a broad sense the term *capabilities,* like the term *power,* connotes an infinitesimal number of factors. Weapons are capabilities; likewise, the quality and quantity of manpower are dimensions of a state's military capabilities; so are its size, geography, climate, population distribution, road system, level of industrialization, level of education, quality of leadership, and of course morale. Most of this list, however, is as trite as it is impossible to pin down to policy-relevant specifics.

This is not the case with the three dimensions of military capabilities that every government must address—namely, manpower, weapons, and the deployment of manpower and weapons over space. *Manpower* relates to the problem of making the most effective use of the available human resources for the nation's security. *Weapons,* the second of these critical dimensions, relates to the optimal choice of arms or, in a sense, to the maximization of overall national firepower at the lowest possible outlay. *Deployment,* the third critical issue, relates to the method of dispersing manpower and firepower over space with a view to maximizing deterrence or, at least, the ability to defend national territory from likely external threats.

In the Israeli experience the most important decisions relating to manpower allocation were made even before the end of the 1948 war. The gigantic war effort in the face of the invasion manifested itself first and foremost in the fact that by September 1948, 112,000 recruits, or close to 15 percent of the population, had been called to the flag. This staggering degree of mobilization enabled the IDF to assemble in the latter stages of the war an armed force of nearly 100,000 soldiers.[7] Thus although the total population of the Jewish state was no more than roughly 700,000, whereas the total population of its adversaries numbered close to 30 million, the new state's fighting force at its peak was larger in absolute terms than those of its five Arab adversaries combined.[8] The long-term implication of this state of affairs was starkly clear. If

Israel wished to maintain a capacity to defend itself in the future, it would have to reduce the army of 1948 to a far smaller size. Recognizing this fact earlier than did most of his colleagues, the minister of defense of the provisional government, David Ben Gurion, pressed his subordinates as early as the summer of 1948—in other words, six months before the termination of hostilities—to take steps to reduce the size of the army. A special task force was set up for the purpose of studying the problem, and an agreed-on solution was already thrashed out before the end of the year.

The task force drew inspiration from two sources: the experience of the Jewish defense organization under the British Mandate and the structure of the Swiss army. During the years 1938–48, the Jewish defense organization in Palestine rested on a system that combined a small kernel of a strategic reserve, the PALMACH (Hebrew acronym for "strike companies"); a larger network of territorially based field forces, the HISH (Hebrew acronym for "field forces"); and an even larger network of a home guard, the HIM (Hebrew acronym for "guard force"). All three organizations were based on a voluntary service and, for long periods, on the clandestine affiliation of an otherwise civilian population. The PALMACH, however, was based on a small number (roughly six companies) of younger, better-trained, and more intensely motivated volunteers, who lived on kibbutzim (collective farms) and spent at least part of their time working on these farms in order to pay their upkeep. The HISH drew a far larger number of volunteers of a lower combat quality. They were for the most part ordinary citizens who, along with their private occupations and trades, also devoted some time to training and to the implementation of various operational orders. The HIM was similar, but it was incapable of carrying out any duties other than the protection of its members' own communities.

The Swiss system, which a number of senior Israeli officers studied in some detail during 1949–50, offered a thoroughly tested method whereby the voluntary prestatehood structure could be adapted to the long-term needs of an independent state. In this system a small nucleus of regular and conscripted personnel trains, maintains depots and command structures, and carries out routine security duties. This nucleus is also available in the event of an emergency and should be able to hold its ground for several days against a surprise attack. The bulk of the armed strength consists, however, of reserves—namely, civilians who were previously trained as conscripts and who are permanently assigned to operational units. Every reserve soldier takes home his personal military equipment, including weapons. In the event of an emergency, they are called back to active duty while the small kernel of regulars holds the line. As soon as the call-up of reserves is completed, the main burden of military operations until the end of hostilities falls on them. They are, in the final analysis, the backbone of the state's fighting force. This system appeared ideally suited to Israeli needs. It could facilitate the maintenance of a large army with high professional standards without imposing an unacceptable burden on the national

economy. Since the experience of the Yishuv before statehood was not dissimilar to the proposed new system, it was realistic to hope, as Israeli planners did, that the IDF could revert to such a structure swiftly, cheaply, and effectively.

During the deliberations leading to the final blueprint, the following aspects were especially emphasized. The permanent nucleus of regulars and conscripts would have to be limited to roughly 30 percent of the total available manpower. Regular service for conscripts would have to be compulsory, universal, and at least two years long. The proportion of combat-ready "teeth" to logistical "tail" would have to be exceedingly rigorous, so that very few potential combatants would be wasted in noncombat duties. Women should serve, too, in order to reduce the need for able-bodied men in the logistical "tail." Reserve units would participate fully in both routine security duties and all-out war situations. The reserves would not be an auxiliary militia but part and parcel of a unified command structure that draws no lines between professional regulars and part-time amateurs. The entire system would have to rely on a first-rate intelligence operation capable of providing an alert of at least seventy-two hours in which the reserves could be called up. Finally, the performance standards of the reservists would be maintained through intensive training periods every year that would not, however, last longer than thirty to forty days per individual reservist, irrespective of rank.

It took less than two years for a system based on these guiding principles to be worked out and put into effect. It was not fully universal because ultra-orthodox Jews, non-Jewish citizens, and women with fewer than ten years of formal education were exempted from the very beginning. All the other guidelines, however, were more or less observed. The upshot was that the forces in being of the IDF were reduced from some 90,000 to about 35,000, but its total strength on call soon exceeded the wartime peak. The system was tested several times during 1950–53, and the call-up methods were further improved. In the future they would include a choice not only between total and partial mobilization, but also between a publicly announced and a secret call-up.[9]

In retrospect, it seems that one important reason that the transition from full mobilization to a reserve-based army proved so relatively smooth was that the IDF of 1948 was, in terms of its weapons, an infantry army. To be sure, at the end of the war the IDF already had two partly mechanized brigades (out of a total of about twelve brigades), each containing one fully armored battalion. In addition, the IDF also had an air arm, the Israeli Air Force (IAF), consisting of a few dozen planes of various piston-engine types, as well as a tiny naval command, the Israel Navy (IN), consisting of a handful of corvettes, frigates, PT boats, and the like.[10] Such an army, with its heavy emphasis on only partly mobile units of riflemen, had neither extensive training requirements nor a significant problem of maintenance and logistics. Two and a half years of service could easily produce well-trained soldiers, a great number of petty officers, and an adequate number of qualified noncommissioned officers.

These could be reassigned into reserve units and keep up their basic professional standards on the basis of thirty or forty days of service per year.

This state of affairs persisted with only minor changes until the fall of 1955. During this period, arms supplies to the Middle East were under the tight control of the three leading Western powers, which were more or less successful in maintaining a stable arms control regime as had been envisaged by the Tripartite Declaration of May 25, 1950. There was, to be sure, a steady growth in the military expenditures of both Israel and its adversaries. Indeed, Ben Gurion reportedly boasted on one occasion that the IDF had succeeded in trebling its strength in terms of manpower and equipment.[11] But this did not result in a revolutionary change in the IDF's order of battle: infantry remained the backbone. No new mechanized units were added to the two original post-1948 brigades. The IAF began to move into the jet age with the acquisition in 1953 of small quantities of British Meteor (subsonic) jet fighters and subsequently of the slightly more advanced French-built Ouragans and Mystères. But the main force of the IAF remained piston-engine fighters and interceptors such as the Messerschmidt, the Mosquito, the Mustang P-51, and the Spitfire.[12]

The Egyptian–Czech arms deal announced on September 27, 1955, however, heralded an entirely new era, in which the IDF's infantry-based force was no longer adequate. According to IDF intelligence sources, in 1955 Egypt was due to receive within a few months 120 MIG-15 jet fighters, 50 Ilyushin-28 twin-engine bombers, 14 Ilyushin-14 transport planes, 60 half-tracks with 122-mm guns, 200 armored troop carriers, 275 T-34 and Stalin III tanks, 56 130-mm multiple rocket launchers, 100 self-propelled SU-100 tank destroyers, a few hundred field guns of various calibers, 2 destroyers, 15 minesweepers, 2 submarines, 150 heavy vehicles, as well as radar systems and recoilless guns.[13]

The Egyptian army at that time consisted of sixteen brigades, of which anywhere from nine to eleven were deployed along the Israeli border. The IDF estimated that by the spring of 1956 this Egyptian force would complete the absorption of the new Soviet weapons and would thus be ready to launch a full-scale war. In the face of this prospect, the immediate response in Israel was to try to expand the total size of the IDF (reserve and regular together) from eleven to fourteen brigades, thereby exhausting the reservoir of qualified manpower. Simultaneously Israel stepped up its efforts to obtain arms from France. Because of the growing French preoccupation with Egypt's support for the Algerian rebels, the French responded favorably to Israel's requests. Consequently, by the early summer of 1956 the IDF already had 60 additional Mystère A-4 jets, 6 more Ouragans, half a dozen more Meteors, 5 S-55 helicopters, 120 French-built light AMX-13 tanks, 80 U.S.-built M-1 (Sherman) tanks, 75 Hyspano-Swiza 30-mm antiaircraft guns, large quantities of Belgian FN semiautomatic rifles and light machine guns, front-wheel-drive vehicles, bazookas, and radar systems.[14]

The acquisition of these new weapons soon generated pressures for a reappraisal of the IDF's deployment doctrine. One of the lessons of the 1948 war was that the regular armed forces were not Israel's only shield against an Arab attack. During the first phase of the Arab invasion (May 15–June 11, 1948), the advance of the Arab armies was largely checked by a chain of isolated and seemingly weak settlements. Many of these "points" (as they were called at the time) had been established during the decade prior to the outbreak of the 1948 war explicitly with a view to augmenting the defensive capacity of the Yishuv. Each one of them separately did not amount to much as a military unit. Kibbutzim such as Deganya near the Sea of Galilee, or Ramat Rachel in the southern approaches of Jersualem, or Yad Mordechai and Negba in the south, had no more than a hundred to two hundred members (including children and women); no more than a few scores of combatants (often including reinforcements); and only a small quantity of light firearms. But they were organized from the start as paramilitary units in disguise; they were surrounded by trenches, fences, and mine fields; and, most important, they were very successful in exacting a high price from the invading Arab armies, in causing the latter's morale to falter, and in substantially deflating the Arabs' overall zeal to fight and confidence in their ability to do so.

During roughly 1949–54 the Israelis remained persuaded that the Arabs had not yet recovered from their defeat. The Jewish state, on the other hand—despite some morale problems of its own—was still caught up in a mood of self-confidence.[15] From such a perspective it is understandable that segments of the Israeli military and political leadership assumed (until the Egyptian–Czech arms deal) that settlements could be employed as an important instrument of national security. The advocates of this method contended that a more or less contiguous chain of settlements should be established along all the boundaries as a means of underscoring the legitimacy of these lines as well as a substitute for a lack of strategic depth. Such a chain of paramilitary "hedgehogs," together with the small kernel of regulars, would be able to deny any significant territorial gains to any combination of Arab forces during the first seventy-two hours after an Arab assault. This in turn would buy time in which the reserves could be called up and brought to the front.[16]

In order to put this system into effect without delay, the Israeli government initiated two parallel operations. The first of these was to establish as quickly as resources permitted a line of settlements along all armistice boundaries. This was achieved by settling civilians, including a great number of bewildered new immigrants who had almost no inkling of the overall strategic purpose that their presence there was supposed to serve. The second operation was to set up NAHAL (Hebrew acronym for "pioneering fighting youth") settlements.

The NAHAL program was an extension into the IDF of an element that greatly resembled the prestatehood PALMACH. But although NAHAL volunteers

came from political-ideological organizations, all traces of such affiliations were suppressed for the duration of their service. The NAHAL boys (the units also included girls) received advanced infantry training, normally within the paratroop corps. They also participated extensively in small-scale military operations. But at least half their tour of duty was spent on a kibbutz, and, toward the conclusion of their service, they were expected to settle somewhere and thus establish a new frontier *nekudah* ("point"). The NAHAL settlement, it was hoped, would ultimately mature into a self-supporting civilian community capable of being incorporated effectively into the state's Spatial Defense system.[17]

The NAHAL proved extremely effective. It led to the creation of a great number of new frontier settlements, which added an important element of security: they acted as a kind of a substitute for strategic depth and for large border garrisons. At the same time, however, NAHAL, drawing as it did on the prime of Israel's youth, soon became the cause of a perennial dispute concerning IDF manpower allocation. Whereas David Ben Gurion, the prime minister and minister of defense during this period, was unreservedly committed to the idea, Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan argued that NAHAL drained a critical ferment from the rest of the IDF. If the best and the brightest, argued the chief of staff, were dispersed throughout the army, they would bring about an upgrading of standards of performance throughout the IDF. If, on the other hand, they were all concentrated in a small elite unit and spent half their service working as farmers, then the impact of their talents and superb motivation would be somewhat lost. Ben Gurion would not accept Dayan's arguments, however, and NAHAL was not disbanded.[18]

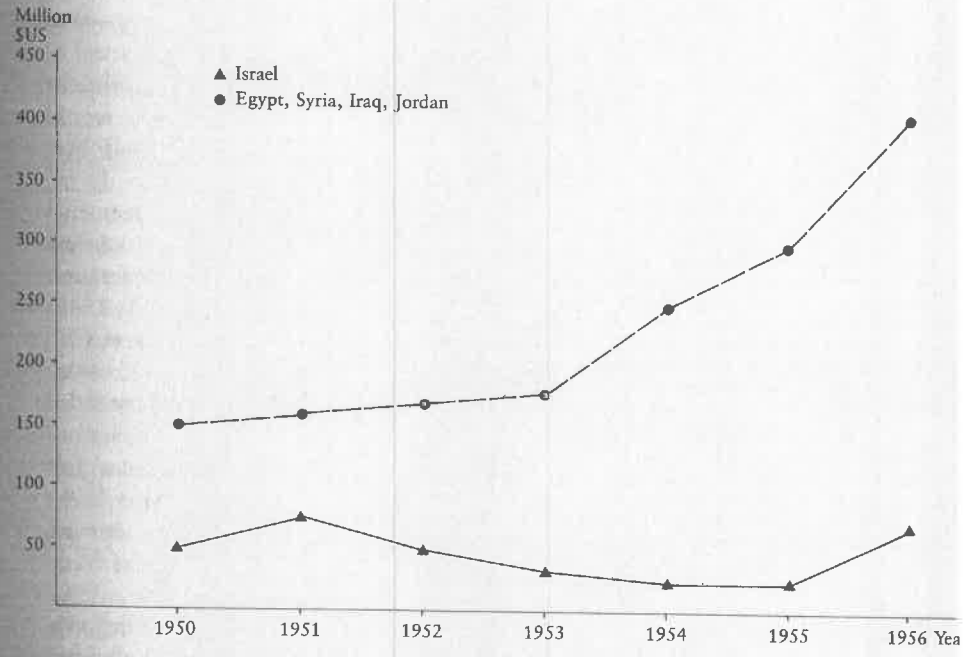
The second method of incorporating the Spatial Defense system into the country's military structure was through its organization *qua* military units. The individual frontier settlement, whether a kubbutz (fully collective community), a *moshav* (partly collective farming community), a *moshava* (an old, established small town) or a so-called Development Town (a more recent type of frontier small town) was in one sense an ordinary social unit. Its population was mixed and included as many women, children, and senior citizens as able-bodied men. Its inhabitants did not wear uniforms, and the atmosphere was always casual and perfectly civilian in character. All locales that were incorporated into the Spatial Defense system, however, also had a parallel identity as military units in almost the full sense of the term. Each locale was designated a "region" (*ezor*). The region would normally have a *MA'AZ* (Hebrew acronym for "regional commanding officer")—namely, an experienced person, normally a former junior officer or noncommissioned officer, who would be entrusted officially with the authority of a commanding officer in the event of an emergency. At his disposal would be both men and arms, organized as a military unit with a clear division of labor and a chain of command. The equipment, including rifles, machine guns, bazookas, mines, grenades, torchlights, first-aid gear, and the like, would be kept in good order in a special place allotted to it by the government.

A cluster of such regions would fall into a bloc (*goush*—namely, a proper, full-time, military headquarters with a complete staff headed by a lieutenant-colonel or a major). The *goush* headquarters would be in charge of all military operations in that area during war and also be in charge of local intelligence operations, equipment maintenance, and training of personnel in peacetime. In addition to the manpower in the various locales, a *goush* would also have at its disposal preassigned reinforcements, a kind of strategic reserve for operations within the area under its command as well as in its immediate vicinity. Finally, a *goush* would also have elements of heavier weaponry, including field guns, as well as a certain engineering capacity.

All the *goushim* (plural of *goush*) would be coordinated by a special corps at General Staff level termed HAGMAR (acronym for "Spatial Defense"). Thus a structure embracing the entire country was set up with a view to augmenting the IDF's ability to cope with the country's defense in the event of a surprise attack or, as was expected in the early 1950s, of a replay of the 1948 invasion. Yet, logical and neat as it may have seemed in the aftermath of the 1948 war, the Spatial Defense system was challenged as soon as the Arab–Israeli arms race began to pick up momentum.

To be effective, the Spatial Defense system had to be reasonably well endowed with resources. These, however, had to be drained from other operations. Hence as the arms race was confronting the IDF with urgent, new, and increasingly expensive requirements, the temptation grew to reduce the budget allotted for Spatial Defense. Before the Egyptian–Syrian–Czech arms deliveries of September–December 1955, the pressures to cut back appropriations for Spatial Defense could still be somehow contained. But the influx of vast quantities of sophisticated Soviet weapons to Egypt and Syria called for an abrupt reappraisal of all previously held concepts, including that of Spatial Defense. (See figure 2–1.)

The strategic rationale for phasing out the Spatial Defense system can be summed up as follows. The urgent need for a major effort to match the Egyptian and Syrian buildup called for a staggering rise in both financial and manpower requirements. As a result, Israel was in fact losing its previous ability to maintain both an offensive and an extensive Spatial Defense system. Previously, when the IDF's offensive capability rested primarily on lightly equipped infantry, the two elements could be sustained simultaneously and even perceived as complementary. The new dimension that was introduced into the arms race implied that Israel would have to shift its emphasis to a mechanized, jet-age, war-winning capability. This would conceivably enable it to deter its adversaries by a putative ability to destroy any attacking force, whether on the adversary's side of the border or on the Israeli side, within days of the outbreak of hostilities. But this strategy had to forego any attempt to defend settlements. If the adversary succeeded in penetrating Israeli territory, settlements might have to be abandoned in the interest of force concentration and in pursuit of a decisive



Source: Based on data in Evron, "Two Periods in Arab–Israeli Strategic Relations," p. 115.
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Figure 2–1. The Arab–Israeli Arms Race, 1950–1956

battle. Israel's main effort, therefore, should be invested in the construction of large, mechanized "fists" combining speed and firepower and capable of throwing any enemy column off balance.

Theoretically, of course, there was another alternative: shifting the emphasis entirely to a defensive posture while foregoing any offensive option. This alternative, however, made no sense at all. For one thing, the emphasis in the Egyptian and Syrian buildup was markedly on offensive capabilities. Given Israel's elongated shape, its physically exposed boundaries, and its uneven population dispersal (with two-thirds of the population crowded into a small rectangular strip of land along the Mediterranean and the rest of the country only very thinly populated by Jews), the construction of a defensive capability that could match the emerging Arab force would be far more expensive, and ultimately less effective, than shifting the emphasis almost exclusively to the construction of a war-winning offensive capacity. In turn there was no escaping the conclusion that the Spatial Defense system might have to be gradually phased out. The shift from defense (deterrence by denial) to deterrence (by punishment) had begun.[19]

Threats and Commitments

In the wake of the 1948 war, Israel had no clear perception of external threats other than a replay of the Arab invasion. The Arabs, it was assumed, would launch a second invasion if only an opportunity to do so presented itself; but, having been beaten, the Arabs were likely to take a long while to do so. Diplomacy, meanwhile, might be able to transform the armistice agreements into peace treaties, thereby terminating the conflict. That this image of the future was simplistic became crystal clear within less than a year after the cessation of hostilities. According to U.N. resolution 194 passed on December 11, 1948, the world organization set up the Conciliation Commission for Palestine (CCP), whose task was to establish an Arab–Israeli peace. The CCP began its work with a visit to the capitals of all parties to the conflict and then proceeded to convene a conference in Lausanne, Switzerland. By the time this conference opened, in April 1949, bilateral talks between Israel on the one hand and Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon on the other were already making significant headway toward the conclusion of bilateral armistice agreements. It was, therefore, not entirely unrealistic to assume that the Lausanne Conference could ultimately lead to peace.[20]

This hope was not to be realized. Although the bilateral armistice negotiations were businesslike and ultimately successful, the multilateral conference degenerated into acrimony as Arab delegates declined to enter into face-to-face negotiations and attempted to outbid one another in a show of militancy toward the Israelis. Faced with this impasse, the CCP ultimately gave up and, on September 19, 1949, called off the conference. This failure had no immediate impact on the situation in the Middle East. For the rest of 1949 and even through 1950, Arab–Israeli relations seemed reasonably stable. Yet gradually, at first almost imperceptibly, the impasse in the political-diplomatic process began to yield serious repercussions. Having lost the war, and propelled by frustration, domestic instability, and rivalry among themselves, the Arabs began to brace for a war against the Jewish state by other means. This took the form of economic boycott, naval blockade, diplomatic quarantine—all on a large scale—a vociferous war of words, as well as small-scale skirmishes along the armistice demarcation lines (as the Israeli borders were officially termed) and various threats to prevent Israel form carrying out a variety of important development projects. Though extensively discussed in Arab official councils, in the Arab League, and in the Arab media, this building up of a sustained campaign against Israel was not the fruit of a coherent master plan. It emerged gradually, slowly giving rise to administrative structures, to policy directives, to military moves and preparations. In Israeli eyes, however, it all added up to an image of a rapidly tightening noose. The upshot was, at first, an incremental chain of political and military reactions and, subsequently, the official and authoritative delineation by Israel of some of these threatening actions as casi belli—provocations that, if not stopped, would ultimately lead Israel to resort to force. The details of this process, in which Israel gradually evolved a posture of deterrence, are worth studying at some length.

Freedom of Navigation as a Casus Belli

Chronologically, the first event that could be connected to what later became a casus belli was the Egyptian decision, after the conclusion of the armistice, not to lift the ban on Israeli shipping through the Suez Canal that Egypt had imposed in December 1947, relaxed in January 1950, and reintroduced on February 6, 1950, with the publication of a royal decree closing the canal to Israeli "war contraband" and setting penalties for violations of this decree, including a blacklist. Subsequently the scope of the ban was gradually expanded to include ships of so-called neutrals (vis-à-vis the Arab–Israeli conflict). With the publication of further Egyptian restrictions in November and December 1953 which banned the shipping to Israel even of foodstuffs, the Suez Canal became completely sealed to any shipping, under any flag, to or from Israel.

The Egyptian ban violated the terms of the armistice agreements and significantly compromised Israel's ability to develop commercial links with Asia and East Africa. Nevertheless, Israel never declared this Egyptian policy a casus belli. In fact, Israel confined itself to diplomatic action in the United Nations and to a number of prodding operations designed to test Egypt's resolve. The first Israeli reaction was to appeal to the Israel–Egypt Mixed Armistice Commission (MAC). MAC discussed the issue at some length, but its ruling that the Egyptian act was in violation of the terms of the armistice was ignored. Israel proceeded to lodge a complaint in the U.N. Security Council. On September 1, 1950, the council ruled against Egypt. The latter at first responded in a conciliatory spirit, and a number of ships carrying cargo to Israel were allowed to pass through the canal in the course of the following two years. But when Egypt imposed the restrictions of November 1953, Israel lodged another complaint in the Security Council. On March 29, 1954, the council once again ruled against Egypt, but the decision was vetoed by the Soviet Union.[21]

The Soviet veto foreshadowed what became a routine in the ensuing decades. From the Israeli point of view, this act not only raised the menacing specter of Soviet support for an Arab war effort but also underscored the futility of turning to the United Nations. In turn, Israel faced the question of what to do about Egypt's conduct. Was the ban on shipping to Israel through the Suez Canal worth the use of force? If so, Israel would have to declare it officially a casus belli. If not, Egypt might be encouraged to think that it could perhaps push Israel further—as would other Arab states. The latter view was shared by the IDF and elements in the Ministry of Defense. The prime minister and minister of foreign affairs of the day, Moshe Sharett, balked at the thought

of committing Israel by declaring the ban a casus belli. He was also apprehensive about the reactions of the Western powers to such an Israeli posture. Consequently, the March 29, 1954, U.N. vote was followed by a prolonged period of infighting within the Israeli government concerning the correct response. Ultimately a compromise was worked out. The *Bat Galim,* a small ship waving an Israeli flag, was sent to sail through the canal in order to test the Egyptians. The latter apprehended the vessel without much ado, and Sharett's government was confronted again by the same dilemma: Was this a casus belli or was it not? Unwilling to go to war over such a dispute, Sharett's cabinet persisted in its reluctance to declare shipping through the canal a casus belli.[22]

Not so, however, in the case of shipping to the port of Eilat, Israel's Red Sea outlet. An Egyptian intention to impose a ban on shipping to and from Eilat could be discerned during the armistice negotiations early in 1949, when, with Saudi permission, Egypt constructed military installations in Sharm el Sheik and on the islands of Tiran and Senafir at the tip of the Sinai peninsula, where the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba meet. Immediately after the signing of the armistice agreements, the Egyptians relaxed their control over passage through these straits. Nevertheless, traffic through these waters was still very limited. The town of Eilat had not yet been established by the Israelis, and Um Rashrash, where Eilat would subsequently be built, had no port facilities capable of servicing commercial shipping. Conversely, as soon as there were signs of an Israeli intention to develop Eilat, the Egyptians moved to block passage through the Sharm el Sheik straits. Early in 1953 they detained a Danish cargo ship en route to Eilat. In September 1953 they treated a Greek vessel in the same way, and on January 1, 1954, they opened fire on a small Italian cargo vessel.[23]

Initially Israel tended to treat the questions of shipping through the Suez Canal and through the straits of Tiran as inseparable. The main reason for this tactic was a lingering hope that the great powers, especially Britain and the United States, which had a vested interest in preserving the freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal, might be able to force the Egyptians to relax their hold on the straits as well. Differently stated, the future of shipping to Eilat was indirectly added as a rider to the question of shipping through the Suez Canal.

This tactical predisposition, however, gave way to a different approach as it became clear that if Israel desisted from using force concerning the Suez Canal, it was powerless to change the Egyptian position.[24] Furthermore, the Israelis became increasingly haunted by fears that made the question of Eilat more burning. Specifically, there were apprehensions that the West, in its anxiety to lure Egypt into a pro-Western alliance structure, would attempt to force Israel to cede the Negev to Egypt and Jordan and thus facilitate territorial contiguity between Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. The evidence that such ideas were seriously being mooted in Britain and the United States was overwhelming.

Consequently, Ben Gurion, who had always regarded the Negev as Israel's only uninhabited reservoir of land, became eager to take every possible step to thwart this design of the Western powers. He decided to settle in the Negev himself in order to set an example that other Israelis might emulate. He upgraded the development of Eilat as a port, as a city, and as a military base to the top of the nation's priorities. In this context there was no escape from sooner or later declaring the Egyptian blockade a casus belli, and Ben Gurion in fact did so for the first time in a public speech on May 6, 1955. Three months later, on August 8, he repeated the same threat in a speech at his party center in which he clearly drew the line between shipping to and from Eilat through the Gulf of Aqaba and shipping through the Suez Canal. Then, on September 29, 1955, he went one step further. In an interview given to the *New York Times,* Ben Gurion explicitly threatened that if Egypt did not lift the blockade within one year, Israel would resort to force. The die was thus cast: Israel's freedom of navigation to and from its southern port and perhaps, by implication, to and from any port, was authoritatively declared a casus belli.[25]

Border Violence as a Casus Belli

While pondering whether or not to declare the Egyptian blockade a casus belli, the Israeli government was faced increasingly by another, equally formidable challenge along its borders. At first this was the result not of any premeditated, coherent plan but, rather, of the fact that Palestinian Arab refugees simply did not recognize—and perhaps did not even fully comprehend—the armistice demarcation lines. For the Israelis, these were borders not only in the legal but also in the cognitive sense. For the bewildered, destitute Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, however, these lines, which were not even very clearly drawn on the ground, simply did not make much sense. The Palestinians could see the sites of their former homes from their present camps. They had been accustomed to walk from, say, Hebron to Gaza, and they could not fully understand why now, because of political negotiations between some remote, faceless Arab and Jewish officials, they could no longer move freely in these parts.

The result was a great deal of what the Israelis saw as illegal infiltration and consequently, insecurity, in border areas, coupled with a growing anxiety on the Israeli side concerning the status of the borders. Still not entirely adjusted to political independence, faced by ample signs that the international community had not yet fully accepted the notion of sovereign Jewish state in Palestine, the Israelis tended to fear that if the tidal wave of infiltration were allowed to continue, it would ultimately serve to delegitimize the Jewish state's boundaries. Moreover, since much of the Jewish population along the frontiers consisted of new immigrants, whose motivation for holding on was low, the Israeli government was haunted by fears of a collapse of the system of border settlements that they had been at pains to consolidate.

As in the case of freedom of navigation, the initial Israeli inclination was to turn to the various MACs (Mixed Armistice Commissions under the aegis of UNTSO), and through them to the U.N. Security Council. But this led nowhere. The main reason was that the only way to stop the infiltration was through disciplinary action by the governments of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, from whose sovereign territory the infiltrators were coming. These governments had no reason at all to help the Israelis in this (or, in fact, in any) regard. Having lost the 1948 war, they were on the whole delighted to see the Israelis in such a plight; in any case, in terms of both their standing at home and their position in the Arab world as a whole, the governments of Israel's neighbors had no incentive whatsoever to discipline the infiltrators. On the contrary, some even had a positive incentive for boosting this phenomenon.

Perceiving the situation in these terms, the Israelis began to resort to reprisal raids.[26] The term itself was, of course, misleading. It created the impression of a primitive "eye for an eye." To say that the Israelis were entirely beyond such primordial sentiments would be implausible. At the same time, however, their ultimate purpose was political utility rather than psychological satisfaction: Israel could not afford to clash with any one of the Western powers as it might have to if it were to launch a major military operation against its neighbors. This consideration dictated a cautious policy of limited actions, which would serve warning to those governments permitting infiltration from their territory and force them to take measures to stop their own population from crossing the border into Israel. Differently stated, this was a limited form of coercive diplomacy presented publicly as retribution in order to counteract international criticism.[27]

Although in the short run this policy did buy Israel some respite, especially in the case of Jordan, where the British-commanded Arab Legion had no problem understanding the Israeli message,[28] in the long run this policy had a singularly escalatory effect. Infiltration of Palestinian Arab civilians was, in fact, brought to a complete stop. But instead of countering mainly unarmed civilians, the Israelis now began to confront trained commandos and, ultimately, large army units. Thus through a process of runaway escalation, Israel was brought to a point at which it had to decide whether to back down or, alternatively, to continue to escalate until this led to a general war. Backing down might encourage its adversaries to believe that the Jewish state was losing its resolve and that, accordingly, they should step up their pressure in order to exploit their success. Continuing to escalate would, in fact, signal that border insecurity, though emanating from a rather limited form of violence, had become, from the Israeli point of view, a casus belli in the full sense of the term. Given this basic choice, it is not at all surprising that Israel, especially under Ben Gurion as premier but also under Sharett (during 1954–55), preferred to escalate the retributions rather than to back down.

Even Ben Gurion, however, did not go as far as actually threatening to resort to a full-scale war. He stated repeatedly that there would be no tranquility on the Arab side of the border if there was none on the Israeli side. He thundered at Arab governments for perpetrating violence. He delivered strident speeches defying the judgment of the United Nations and challenging the evenhandedness and fairness not only of the Soviet Union but indeed of the Western powers, too. He clearly regarded the insecurity of the border areas as an intolerable situation and attempted, as will be seen, to persuade his cabinet colleagues to initiate a large-scale military operation. But he would not attempt to deter the Arabs from further border violence through the enunciation, openly and unambiguously, that it constituted a casus belli.[29]

Foreign Military Intervention in Neighboring Countries as a Casus Belli

Both the question of free navigation and the problem of border insecurity suggest a simple, almost trite feature of the Israeli approach: the Jewish state was attempting to obtain only the preservation of the status quo that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 war. This common denominator of the first two issues in the present discussion was also the hallmark of Israel's third type of casus belli—namely, adverse changes in the political and/or military situation within Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Broadly speaking, Israel had no specific ideological preferences insofar as these regimes were concerned. Socialists and liberal democrats for the most part, Israeli leaders were not particularly enamored of the patriarchal and (in Israeli eyes, at least) often thoroughly corrupt regimes in the Arab world. Because of this outlook Israel was initially favorably disposed toward the 1952 Egyptian revolution that ousted King Farouq and brought Nasser to power.[30] This episode notwithstanding, however, Israeli leaders in the final analysis never regarded the ideological complexion of Arab regimes as an issue of any intrinsic consequence. On the other hand, they were very particular about the domestic affairs of Israel's neighbors when these could conceivably lead to a military and political balance not consonant with the security and well-being of the Jewish state.

This attitude focused initially on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and its neighbor to the east, Iraq (until July 1958, the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq). The Iraqis took part in the 1948 war but, not having a common border with Israel, refused to enter into armistice negotiations after the cessation of hostilities; thus at least technically they remained at war with the Jewish state. The Israelis, for their part, insisted in their bilateral negotiations with Jordan that the Iraqi forces should be withdrawn completely, at least from the West Bank of the Jordanian kingdom. The Jordanians, who in the spring of 1949 realized that Israel had become sufficiently strong to capture the West Bank

and who knew that some influential Israelis were, in fact, advocating this step, hastened to comply with the Israeli demand.[31]

During the 1950–56 period, the possibility of Iraqi involvement in Jordan as well as in Syria seemed imminent on a number of occasions. This was particularly true after the Egyptian revolution, when Iraqi–Egyptian rivalry reached a new peak while Jordan became one of the main battlegrounds of this rivalry. Indeed, whenever the regime in Jordan seemed in danger, there would be almost instantly a distinct possibility of Iraqi involvement for the purpose of propping up the Jordanian monarchy.[32]

Although Syria was a republic and was not ruled by relatives of the Iraqi royal family, its internal circumstances at that time were not dissimilar to those of Iraq. For one thing, a succession of coup d'états demonstrated the extreme fragility of the Syrian regime. As in Jordan, moreover, Syria was divided down the middle between pro- and anti-Nasserists, with the latter being almost automatically pro-Iraqi and ipso facto pro-Western, and the former taking a pro-Soviet line. To make matters even more confusing, the Hashemite regime of Iraq nurtured an aspiration for the creation of a Fertile Crescent Union under Iraqi suzerainty.

The Soviets were actively and single-mindedly wooing the pro-Egyptian elements in Syria, whereas the Western powers were divided. France objected to the Anglo-American idea of a Baghdad pact and, therefore, made little effort to encourage Syria, where it still had a measure of influence, to join the proposed treaty organization. Britain and the United States both favored Syrian participation in the pact because they sought to expand the regional alliance framework as a bulwark against further Soviet penetration and, incidentally, to legitimize in Arab eyes the continued presence of British troops on the Arabs' sovereign territories. Iraqi influence and, under certain circumstances, intervention in both Jordan and Syria was thus tacitly supported by Britain and the United States but actively opposed by France, Egypt, the Soviet Union, and to a certain extent Israel as well.[33]

Israel, to be sure, would not object to changes in the Fertile Crescent if these were consonant with its own interests. An Iraqi takeover of Jordan and/or Syria, which would lead to the deployment of Iraqi forces in close proximity to the Israeli border, would be strenuously opposed. On the other hand, if Jordan, Syria, or Lebanon for that matter were to be subsumed within a larger anti-Nasserist and pro-Western framework that would make peace with the Jewish state, there would be no objection. The trouble was that the Israelis could not really make up their minds about Iraq's real objectives. Faced with the rising tide of militant Nasserism, the Hashemite regime in Iraq could not afford to be accused of being "soft on Zionism" or of entertaining territorial ambitions at the expense of fellow Arab states. The Iraqis, therefore, had to justify every introduction of troops into either Syria or Jordan by claiming to be standing up to an Israeli threat. From Israel's viewpoint it was therefore

impossible to tell whether an Iraqi contingent on Jordanian territory was a boon or a menace.

Under these perplexing circumstances, the Israelis searched for a compromise. They would not be adamant about any entry of Iraqi forces into Jordan itself, but they would not agree to the stationing of an Iraqi expeditionary force west of the Jordanian capital, Amman, and certainly not west of the Jordan River. Anxious to avoid friction with Britain, which was bound by treaty to defend Jordan, Israeli governments during the period under discussion would not even state their position on this issue in public. Thus when Foreign Minister Golda Meir announced publicly on October 13, 1956, that Israel would not tolerate an Iraqi deployment inside Jordan, she was instantly subject to a great deal of criticism not only from her cautious subordinates in the Foreign Ministry but, indeed, from none other than the formidable David Ben Gurion. Neither the prime minister nor any member of his cabinet thought that Israel should become publicly committed to a clearly stated definition of a casus belli in this regard. Contingency planning for military moves in the event of an Iraqi intervention beyond an ambiguously defined "red line" was one thing. A public commitment to act was quite another proposition.[34]

Changes in the Deployment of Arab Forces

Though successfully repelled, the Arab invasion of May 1948 left an indelible imprint on the Israeli psyche. With Israel's elongated shape, multiplicity of adversaries, lack of territorial depth, and heavy reliance on a reserve army, its policymakers could not but be virtually obsessed with the nighmare of a replay by the Arabs of the coordinated 1948 invasion. Such an invasion could begin simultaneously from four or five directions. Since Jordan's West Bank created a narrow Israeli "waisteline" of 15 to 17 kilometers, it could lead to the split of the country into two separate parts, one in the north and one in the south, within a few hours of the beginning of an invasion. The most important ingredient in such a scenario was undoubtedly the Arabs' ability to mass forces on Israel's border prior to the beginning of the invasion. If they succeeded in doing so, Israel could be subsequently taken by surprise, and there would not be enough time to call up the reserves. The results could be catastrophic. Arab armies could roll into Israel without encountering any serious resistance. They could, under such circumstances, completely disrupt the mobilization of the reserves. If such a scenario ever materialized, Israel would lose the war and possibly its independence within a matter of a few days, if not hours.[35]

Whether or not the Arabs actually developed detailed operational plans for carrying out such an invasion is essentially immaterial. The Israelis acted on the assumption that the Arabs had such plans and that, given an opportunity, they would not hesitate to carry them out. Accordingly, from the Israeli point of view it was imperative to acquire an extensive strategic depth, a kind

of demilitarization of all Arab territories that could be used as launching pads for an invasion. The obvious means to achieving this were deterrent threats declaring the concentration of Arab forces on *their* side of the border a casus belli from the Israeli point of view. Nevertheless, prior to the 1956 war Israel never took such a step, at least not explicitly, primarily for two reasons.

First, until late in 1954, the bulk of the Egyptian army was concentrated in the Suez Canal area. Egyptian attention was almost exclusively focused on the struggle against the British, and the British forces acted, from the Israeli point of view, as a decoy, a barrier separating Egyptians and Israelis. Under these circumstances the Sinai peninsula was not a launching pad for another Egyptian invasion, but rather a de facto demilitarized zone. The Israeli government was fully alive to this and so apprehensive about the consequence of a British departure that at least one cabinet member contemplated the possibility of disrupting Egyptian–British negotiations concerning the evacuation of the British.

Having failed disastrously in this misguided move—the infamous Lavon affair—Israel soon faced precisely the situation it had dreaded most. The Israeli–Egyptian confrontation in the Gaza Strip rapidly escalated as Egyptian *fedayeen* (guerrillas, martyrs), were deployed in the strip and sent on sabotage operations inside the Jewish state. The IDF stepped up the scale of its own reprisals against Egyptian army installations in the Gaza Strip and in northern Sinai. Egypt's status as the emerging leader of an awakening Arab world was challenged, and the revolutionary regime of Gamal Abdul Nasser was impelled to pour reinforcements into those parts of the Sinai and the Gaza Strip adjacent to Israel. He was also prompted to seek Soviet aid.

The result was an even more extensive series of attacks and counterattacks involving already sizable formations of regular Israeli and Egyptian troops. In the short run Israel had the upper hand in this escalating encounter. Egypt, however, did not yield. Instead it augmented substantially the forces deployed on Israel's border; in a matter of a year these were increased from one to eleven brigades. Israel, which had not previously defined such an Egyptian deployment as a casus belli, thought it made little sense to do so once the heavy concentration of Egyptian forces had become a formidable reality. An insecure, proud, and ambitious regime such as Nasser's could not be expected to withdraw its forces from their positions along Israel's border simply because the Israelis so demanded. Not having previously succeeded in playing deterrence, the Israelis could not realistically hope to succeed in a (far more intricate) game of compellence.[36] The Jewish state was thus faced with a choice between two courses of action: waiting for an Egyptian attack or launching a preventive attack themselves. In a word, the opportunity to play deterrence through the designation of a casus belli had been missed.

Second, Israel could not declare the concentration of Jordanian forces in the West Bank a casus belli because of the British involvement in Jordan; indeed, it may not even have been all that interested in preventing the presence of Jordanian troops in the area. As long as the bulk of the Egyptian army was committed to the Canal Zone and as long as the Arab Legion was still under the command of professional British officers, headed by Sir John Glubb (Glubb Pasha), the presence of the Jordanian forces in the West Bank was not a threat; to some extent, indeed, it was a source of confidence. Controlled by Britain, a weak and intimidated Jordan would not launch a war against Israel. At the same time, British control over the Arab Legion turned this force, in effect, into an instrument of Israeli policy, almost into a tacit Israeli surrogate.

Israeli reprisals, as has been argued, were designed to impress upon the government at the receiving end—be it Jordan, Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon—that unless it was prepared to countenance the prospect of a large-scale showdown with the Jewish state, that nation's own best interests were to go to any length to discipline infiltrators. This message was not lost on the Jordanians, at least as long as the British cohort was still in charge. In fact, after a number of reprisals the Arab Legion hastened to deploy no fewer than six battalions astride the armistice demarcation lines. Their orders, however, were not to pose a threat to Israel but quite the opposite: to shoot on sight anyone who tried to cross the lines from east (the Jordanian side) to west (the Israeli side).

This effective, but tacit, collaboration between the IDF and the Arab Legion collapsed, however, following the ouster of General Glubb and the rest of the British officers early in March 1956. To a certain extent, the extremity of the about-face in the Jordanian position could be accounted for by the intemperate conduct of the new chief of staff, General Ali Abu Nawar, a fiercely nationalist, anti-British and pro-Egyptian officer. In addition, the change could be attributed to the decline of discipline in the ranks of the Arab Legion and to extensive subversion by Moslem Brotherhood surrogates, inspired and assisted by the Egyptian consul general in Amman. All these factors together led to a sharp increase in terrorist activities in Israel by Arabs crossing from the West Bank. Israel's reply was to step up reprisals against Jordanian army (hitherto referred to as the Arab Legion) installations on the West Bank. Since the expulsion of the British officers had not been accompanied by the abrogation of the 1948 mutual defense pact between Jordan and Britain, Israel had to be careful not to issue broader casus belli threats that called for the Jordanians, in the form of an ultimatum, to remove their troops from the West Bank or even only from the vicinity of the Israeli border.[37]

Thus during the 1949–56 period, Israel's only clearly declared casus belli was Ben Gurion's ultimatum to Egypt to remove the naval blockade of Eilat within one year. Israeli leaders issued profuse warnings to their adversaries through third parties and in public speeches. They attempted to impress the general message on the Arabs through ever-escalating reprisals. In the final analysis, however, they balked during this period at the thought of undertaking irrevocable commitments to resort to force. To a certain extent, this hesitation

may have resulted from the Israeli government's total preoccupation with a frantic search for alliances as a means of buttressing the Jewish state's deterrence. A bellicose posture enunciating a number of casi belli vis-à-vis all the Jewish state's neighbors may have been perceived instinctively as an impediment to obtaining such alliances.

In Search of Allies

In a sense Israel's alliance experience dates back to the very origins of the Zionist movement. The leadership of what came to be known as *political* (as distinct from *practical*) Zionism assumed from the outset that the patronage of a leading world power was indispensable to Jewish national revival. Theodor Herzl, the founding father of political Zionism, sought Ottoman and imperial German support but obtained neither. Chaim Weizmann and Nahum Sokolov, who led the movement from the middle of World War I, sought and obtained the open and formal support of Britain and the tacit support of France. Within less than two decades, however, Britain was visibly reversing its alliances and heading toward a vigorous bid for the patronage of an awakening Arab world. The Zionist response was to turn to the United States. The shift in Zionist orientation became inseparably intertwined with the struggle for the leadership of the movement. The aging Weizmann's faith in Britain remained unshaken, whereas David Ben Gurion, formerly a trade unionist in Palestine and by World War II the chairman of the Zionist executive, forcefully advocated a shift to the United States. The latter won both the leadership of the Zionist movement and the shift in the movement's alliance orientation. After the end of World War II, this was reflected in the intensification of the struggle against the British Mandate in Palestine, with its severe restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchases, and in a vigorous campaign for U.S. support in the final stages of the struggle for independence.[38]

This preindependence alliance policy was, however, predominantly diplomatic-political rather than strategic. A patron was sought primarily for purposes of international recognition, not effective participation in a balance-of-power game of nations. As the United Nations organization, during the spring and summer of 1947, was moving toward its momentous decision to partition Palestine, Ben Gurion and some of his associates became convinced that a major war, in which the Arab world as a whole would assault the Jewish state as soon as it came into existence, was virtually a foregone conclusion. Moved by such a grim perception of the main trends of events, Ben Gurion focused his entire attention, as of the spring of 1947, on preparing the Yishuv for such a war. The result was also a shift in the perception of international patronage. Political-diplomatic support remained crucial. But strategic backing, or at least the supply of arms, became the first priority.[39]

From this perspective, Israel's options were very limited. The Truman administration was split. The State and Defense Departments were adamantly opposed even to the idea of an independent Jewish state, let alone the proposition that the United States should offer it an alliance. President Truman himself was favorably disposed and felt, apparently, that by helping the Zionist struggle he could also improve his seemingly poor prospects in the approaching presidential elections. The result of this split in the administration was an inconsistent policy. The United States moved reluctantly toward support for the partitioning of Palestine and, subsequently, toward the de facto recognition of the fledgling Jewish state. Although by doing so it aroused a great deal of resentment in the Arab world, the United States nevertheless proceeded to impose a virtual embargo on arms to the Middle East, where the only state without any assured sources of arms was Israel. The dispute inside the administration thus produced a policy that left both Arabs and Jews almost equally frustrated.[40]

Britain openly supported the Arabs. This support included arms supplies, political backing in the United Nations, and large-scale involvement of British personnel in the armies of Israel's three leading adversaries: Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. France acted in much the same way toward Israel's remaining two adversaries, Lebanon and Syria.[41] By contrast, the Soviet Union was supportive of Zionist demands at the United Nations, hastened to recognize Israel de jure, and authorized Czechoslovakia to supply the beleaguered Jewish state with arms.

Against the background of a polarizing international system, this constellation presented Israel with a major foreign policy dilemma. Going along with the Soviet bloc would cause colossal damage to Israel's relations with the United States. Inside Israel itself, moreover, only a small fraction on the left of the political spectrum was prepared to countenance affiliation with the East and distant relations with the United States. Ben Gurion and his political party, MAPAI—the precursor of the Israeli Labor Party (ILP)—were as critical of the Soviets and their conduct in eastern Europe as anyone in the West. Along with the majority of Israelis they were also apprehensive lest a breach with the United States owing to Israel's dependence on the Soviets place the five million strong U.S. Jewish community in an awkward situation.

Since Soviet support in the United Nations and, beyond that, Soviet support of Czech military supplies were crucial, Israel had to find a way of obtaining this support without causing irreparable damage to its relations with the United States. The solution was a careful balancing act whose purpose was to keep up the flow of arms from the Eastern bloc without antagonizing the United States, and to maintain close relations with the United States without arousing the suspicions of the already paranoid Soviets. This perception of the problem led Israel during its first two years of independence to a policy of nonidentification. Such a policy served the requirements of domestic

coalition building and coalition maintenance as well. At least as far as Ben Gurion was concerned, however, this was a stop gap, an interim policy rather than the expression of a long-term policy preference. Whatever his public statements on this matter, he was unquestionably convinced that an alliance with the United States was indispensable for Israel's long-term security and well-being.[42]

The policy of nonidentification served Israel well during its first two years. Without Soviet assistance, the Jewish state might never have succeeded in holding its own in the 1948 war. Given the acute polarization between East and West during the same period, however, the balancing act that nonidentification entailed became increasingly untenable. By 1949 there were signs that the Soviets were not content to bail Israel out of trouble with the Arabs without a quid pro quo in the form of a more positive identification with the East in its struggle with the West. Arms supplies from the Eastern bloc dwindled to a trickle and then stopped altogether. There was a great deal of consternation in Moscow following the enthusiastic reception that Soviet Jewry gave Golda Meir, Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. Trials of Soviet Jewish doctors accused of subversion were stage-managed by the Soviet government. The Soviet press indulged in a wave of anti-Semitic propaganda. Above all, there were the first signs of Soviet interest in the Arab world.[43]

The break came with the Korean War. Israel could not afford to dodge the U.N. vote on the Uniting for Peace resolution nor could it oppose the U.S. request that the U.N. force in Korea pursue the North Koreans beyond the 38° parallel. The Soviets drew the inevitable conclusion. Although Israeli relations with the Soviets were not immediately severed, they became chilly and tense. This, however, was not paralleled by a simultaneous improvement in Israel's relations with the West. In May 1950, a month before the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, the United States, Britain, and France had issued a communiqué—dubbed ever since the Tripartite Declaration—committing themselves to a virtual embargo on all arms shipments to the Middle East. Given that the flow of arms from the Soviet bloc had already been terminated earlier, Israel was left not only without a reliable patron but, indeed, with no major source of arms.[44]

Thus began a period of about five years that has gone down as one of the darkest in Israel's history. Earlier hopes that the great victory in the 1948 war and the subsequent armistice agreements would lead to peace had been shattered. The Arab world was visibly preparing for another war. The British and the French were (in Israeli eyes) playing a kind of appeasement toward the Arabs in order to salvage their declining influence in the region and, beyond that, their status as world powers. The United States and the Soviet Union were vying for Arab favor in order to consolidate their newly acquired positions as the world's superpowers. Israel was perceived as a burden, an irritating factor, an unwelcome fruit of a bizarre and almost unnatural twist in world history, an embarrassment, a liability to be ignored rather than an asset to be cultivated.

The question, to be sure, was not merely one of status, although to the hypersensitive Israelis this too was important. If the Arabs were preparing for war, Israel needed an alliance with a great power in order to improve its ability to deter, to have a dissuasive impact on the Arabs' strategic calculus, to offset the Arabs' fundamental military superiority. If the Arabs were faced by an Israel in alliance with a major power, they would have to take into account the possibility that starting a war might bring them face to face not only with the tiny Jewish state but also with the might of a major outside power. In the early 1950s, when the United States, the Soviet Union, and even Britain and France were still widely regarded as invincible superpowers and not (as in the post-Vietnam era) as Gullivers in chains, an alliance with one of them would matter. It could not guarantee that no war would break out between Arabs and Israelis. But Ben Gurion and some of his colleagues believed that by ensuring the flow of arms to Israel and by committing in advance a major power to Israel's defense, an Israeli alliance with a major power would substantially reduce the likelihood of such a war.

The first instance in which it appeared for a brief moment that such a security guarantee might be within Israel's reach occurred in December 1950, when Richard Crossman, a visiting British Labor member of Parliament with a strong pro-Israel record, made unofficial inquiries about whether or not Israel would consider some link with Britain. Eager to obtain an alliance, the Israelis were prepared to overlook their resentment toward Britain on account of its policy in the previous decade and apparently responded favorably. Crossman reported the talk in Whitehall, and several weeks later the Israeli ambassador to the Court of St. James was asked in an official manner whether his government would consider a military liaison with Great Britain. When the Israeli response was again favorable, the British government sent the commanding officer of British forces in the Near East, General Sir Brian Robertson, on a visit to Israel.

The talks with Robertson revealed, however, that what Britain was prepared to offer was a far cry from what the Israelis were hoping for. The main concentration of British forces in the Near East was in the Suez Canal area. The threat on which the British were focusing was that of a Soviet incursion into the Arab heartland of the area. Implicitly the British were also interested in exaggerating the Soviet threat as a means of justifying their own request to maintain a presence along the Suez Canal. In their talks with the Israelis, however, this aspect was not apparently discussed. What was discussed extensively was a British request for a right of passage for their forces in Egypt across Israeli territory to the Fertile Crescent.

Robertson's ideas infuriated Ben Gurion, who found them condescending, patronizing, and exploitative. He told the British general that Israel would accept the British proposals only if they were made part of a larger package with a clear strategic-political, and not just logistic, significance. Israel, Ben Gurion

demanded, should be admitted to the British Commonwealth as a full member. Britain should offer Israel military supplies and economic assistance. It should also proffer its good offices as a go-between seeking to launch peace talks between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbors, especially those—like Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt—that were still within the British sphere of influence. Robertson's reaction was that, as a soldier, he had no authority to go into such broad political matters. The general took the matter to the new foreign secretary, Herbert Morrison, who subsequently wrote to Ben Gurion. Morrison responded ambiguously to the Israeli conditions for accepting Robertson's ideas, and the Israelis decided that there was no point in pursuing the matter further.

In October 1951, Churchill, widely regarded a lifelong pro-Zionist, became Britain's prime minister again. Hoping that the formation of the new Conservative government might pave the way to some strategic understanding with Britain, Ben Gurion at last replied to Morrison's letter. He addressed it, of course, to the new foreign secretary, Sir Anthony Eden. The Israeli prime minister did not return to the Commonwealth idea, but proposed instead a more modest degree of military-strategic cooperation. Eden, the godfather of the Arab League, was not at all impressed by Ben Gurion's arguments. He looked forward to the formation of a Supreme Allied Command for the Middle East (SACME) that could be established on the basis of British–American–Turkish–Arab cooperation. This would take care of both the Soviet threat (which in the Middle East concerned the United States more than it did the British) and the threat to the British position in the Middle East from Arab nationalism. Within such a framework, as within the framework of the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO) proposed by the British later, when it became clear that Egypt would not participate in SACME, Eden saw no role for Israel—certainly not before the establishment of a firm Arab–Israeli peace.

From the Israeli point of view this attitude was at once an insult and an injury—insulting insofar as it rejected the outstretched Israeli hand, and injurious insofar as it proposed to strengthen the Arabs rather than help deter them from what the Israelis saw as aggression. Be that as it may, the Israelis, by their own perception of their vital interests, could not afford to be choosy or indignant. Thus when it transpired that the British had decided to vacate the Suez Canal Zone, the Israelis made another approach. This time it was made by the new prime minister, Moshe Sharett, who proposed that British bases be transferred from Egypt to Israeli territory. Specifically Sharett had in mind the establishment of British bases in the Negev Desert in the south of the country. Again, however, the British were not impressed. They did not even consider this new Israeli idea seriously but proceeded instead to move their bases to Cyprus.[45]

The utter frustration of these contacts with the British reinforced the Israeli tendency to turn to the United States. As long as the Truman administration was in power, there was little of use that could be achieved. But the advent of the

Eisenhower administration in January 1953 aroused new hopes. The firey anticommunist rhetoric of Secretary of State Dulles, in particular, caused some Israelis to hope that perhaps there could be a basis for closer cooperation. Indeed, at one point even Ben Gurion was led to believe that the United States under the new administration would be interested in establishing military bases on Israeli territory.[46]

This, however, was not to be. There was an on-again, off-again dialogue between the two governments concerning the possibility of U.S. security guarantees to the Jewish state. Primarily as a result of American rather than Israeli reservations, however, it never really approached a point of decision for three apparent reasons. First, the United States insisted that a "security commitment" to Israel could only be offered once the United States' strategic relations with Israel's neighbors were fully consolidated. Secretary of State Dulles contemplated a treaty between the Western powers and the Arab world that would be linked to a Central Treaty Organization based on Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan—the so-called Northern Tier. He hoped that Egypt would ultimately agree to participate in this framework. Because of the intensity of Egyptian hostility toward Israel at the time, he would not jeopardize prospects for obtaining Egyptian participation by undertaking any far-reaching commitment to Israel.

Whether or not they really intended to substitute U.S. for the British hegemony they were determined to abolish, the Egyptians demanded, as a precondition, that the United States force Israel to cede parts of the Negev. This was to facilitate territorial contiguity between Egypt and the Hashemite regimes of the Fertile Crescent. Both Secretary of State Dulles and the British foreign secretary, Eden, who rarely saw eye to eye on any topic, concurred that the demand was worth exploring. Thus not only was the Israeli request for a security guarantee turned down, but Israel was also made to understand that it might have to pay with its own territory for the consolidation of a U.S.–British–led strategic alliance from which Israel would be excluded.

Second, the United States repeatedly demanded an Israeli commitment to endorse the armistice demarcation lines as final boundaries as a precondition to any commitment on the part of the United States itself to offer a security guarantee. This was, of course, perplexing to the Israelis: while making such a demand, the United States was at the same time discussing with Egypt and Great Britain the possibility of Israel's ceding parts of this same territory in order to establish contiguity between Egypt and the Fertile Crescent.

Third, the United States also requested Israeli assurances that reprisals would be stopped forthwith. The U.S. government did not offer ironclad promises that the cause of the reprisals—namely, Arab infiltration and guerrilla warfare against the Israelis—would be stopped. All they could do was to urge the Israelis to stop the reprisal attacks while promising to request that the Arabs stop the harassment of their Israeli neighbors. Such an attitude not only annoyed

the Israelis but also made them aware of the prohibitive price they might have to pay in order to obtain a security guarantee. They had hoped for a U.S. guarantee as a means of bolstering their ability to deter the Arabs from launching a general war. In the terminology of Israeli strategic discussion, a U.S. guarantee would ameliorate the problem of "basic" security. It would also oblige Israel to consult with the United States before resorting to force on any scale, including small acts of retribution for small-scale harassment. Differently stated, although Israel would gain a major increment of improvement in terms of "basic" security, it might have to pay dearly in terms of its freedom to attend to problems of "current"—that is, subwar, low-level—security.[47]

The growing awareness on the part of most leading Israeli policymakers of this aspect of the issue of a security guarantee somewhat reduced their interest in and enthusiasm for a full-fledged alliance with a major power. At any rate, the negotiations with the United States and Britain on this issue led nowhere and merely created in Israel a growing sense of resentment, isolation, and anxiety. Thus when on April 3, 1955, the government of Israel received yet another evasive U.S. reply to queries about a security guarantee, the minister of defense, David Ben Gurion (Sharett was still prime minister at that time) suggested that all appeals to the United States should be stopped. Israeli emissaries should concentrate instead on attempts to obtain arms—with no political arrangements attached—from wherever they could be obtained.

What prompted Ben Gurion to suggest such an approach was not only the continued U.S. evasion of serious discussion, but also the fact that by the spring of 1955 it was increasingly apparent that Israel could turn to France for those arms that the United States would not supply. The French, to be sure, did not offer any security guarantees. But Israel's frustration with the other Western powers and doubts about the value of such a guarantee if it was tied to restrictions on Israel's freedom to deal with current security caused the Israelis, especially Ben Gurion, Chief of Staff Dayan, and Shimon Peres (then director general of the Ministry of Defense), to shift their attention in another direction. The idea that Israel needed a comprehensive great power patron to reinforce its deterrent capacity was not abandoned. Assuming that the likelihood of a major round of hostilities was rapidly increasing, these policymakers now focused their attention on the problem of military readiness. In this context, the window of opportunity that seemed to be slowly opening for purchasing arms in significant quantities from the French shifted emphasis from the negotiation of a political guarantee to the acquisition and absorption of badly needed arms.[48]

The roots of the change in the previously almost hostile French attitude lay in the French struggle to retain control in North Africa. Increasingly it became clear that in order to advance his position in the Arab world, Colonel Nasser, Chairman of the Free Officers' Committee ruling Egypt since the coup of July 1952, was eager to play a role in supporting national liberation movements

in Tunisia, Morocco, and above all Algeria. Under Premier Pierre Mendès-France, the French granted independence to Morocco and Tunis in the hope that this would help them consolidate their hold over Algeria. Nasser, riding the crest of his success in ejecting the British from the Canal Zone, was determined to assist the Algerian National Liberation Front (better known by its French acronym, FLN) in its struggle against the French. In December 1954 the FLN declared an all-out rebellion. Since the FLN's main sanctuary outside Algeria was Egypt, France—which until the previous year had supplied Egypt with arms—suddenly found itself in the same boat with Israel—namely, with Nasser as its main adversary. This was recognized by the Ministries of Defense in Israel and France before it was acknowledged by the respective Foreign Ministries. Consequently, a tacit alliance quickly emerged in which the main channels of communication were not embassies but the military attachés within them.[49]

All this gathered momentum from the autumn of 1955 after the signing of the Czech–Egyptian arms deal. Nasser's morale and self-confidence were boosted, and he stepped up his assistance to the Algerian rebels. From the Israeli perspective it seemed that within six months—by the spring of 1956—the Egyptians would be ready for war. The objective of Israeli policy thus ceased to be deterrence—if, indeed, during this period it ever was. Assuming that war was imminent, the Israeli government focused on preparations. Should they initiate hostilities or should they allow Egypt to determine whether or not there would be hostilities, on what scale, with what participants, and when?

The Use of Force

In the wake of the 1948 war, Israel had no clear doctrine laying down rules concerning the employment of force. There was, to be sure, a rich legacy of previous experience from which a doctrine could draw valuable insights. Thus during the prestatehood period it was taken for granted, almost without dispute, that Israel would not be the "aggressor"—that it would never initiate hostilities. On the other hand, the Hagana (the largest underground Jewish defense organization under the British Mandate) and even more so the PALMACH and the militant fringe underground organizations, the Irgun (IZL) and the Stern Group (LEHI), had tended during the last decade of the struggle for independence to prefer massive punitive retaliation over a limited tit-for-tat (flexible response).

Although the latter two groups were involved in a fierce dispute with the former organization, the difference among them on this basic question of when and how to use force was one of degree and not of principle. The Hagana was the instrument of moderate, mainstream resistance to both the British and the Arabs. The PALMACH was a special operations unit affiliated with the same body

The Irgun and the Stern Group, on the other hand, represented militants who challenged the authority of the mainstream Yishuv leadership. Accordingly, Hagana units were the least involved in military operations, whereas Irgun and Stern Group units deliberately sought to shake opinion in Palestine and beyond by carrying out spectacular acts of sabotage. All four instruments of resistance tended, however, to carry out operations that were far out of proportion to the British or Arab actions preceding them. They acted on the assumption that military and sabotage operations should be designed to attract attention and on the related presupposition that a limited game of tit-for-tat would emphasize Arab, and even British, comparative advantages. Even in the 1930s, in fact, these assumptions were already at the heart of a stormy and divisive debate in the Yishuv. But by 1948 the proponents of restraint (*havlaga*) had already become a small minority, whereas the advocates of retaliation (*tguva*)—in fact, of massive retaliation—had won the day.[50]

During the same period there was, however, an important difference between the Hagana and PALMACH, on the one hand, and the Irgun and the Stern Group, on the other hand, concerning the choice of targets. The former espoused the doctrine of *tohar haneshek* ("purity of arms"), which objected to the deliberate (as distinct from accidental) use of force against civilians. The latter tended to be far less particular about the loss of life of civilians; they argued, with a certain degree of justice, that the distinction between combatants and noncombatants in what was essentially a state of civil war was untenable and that, in any case, their adversaries did not observe it.[51]

With the establishment of the state of Israel, all these political militias were incorporated into the IDF. The latter essentially adopted the approach of the hagana and PALMACH—namely, that military operations against civilians (the tactical-conventional implementation of strategic countercity warfare) should be avoided. In practice the IDF, too, found it very difficult to implement this high ethical principle. After all, during the first six months of the 1948 war (December 1947–May 1948), the main battles raged in mixed (Arab–Jewish) cities like Tel Aviv–Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Haifa; it was therefore almost impossible to avoid civilian casualties in great numbers. Indeed, the fighting units themselves still occupied an unclear status and could be regarded as armed bands of civilians.

Later, after the invasion of Israel by its neighbors, the war became more regular. At this stage Israel at last had a clear opportunity to put into practice the distinction between front and rear (or military and civilian, for that matter). Under pressure, however, and impressed by the fact that their Arab adversaries did not hesitate to engage in aerial bombardment of cities, the Israelis were sometimes tempted to engage in similar practices. The IAF, to put it bluntly, bombed Damascus, Cairo, and Amman—and it did so under orders from the highest authority.[52]

Many of the makers of these chapters in Israel's history were also the people who subsequently laid down the ground rules of the national security doctrine

of the Jewish state after independence. Nevertheless, they did not proceed to set out a detailed doctrine as soon as the 1948 war was over. Having emerged as leading policymakers in a system that placed much store on the fine points of ideology but also, paradoxically, on a pragmatic attitude of trial and error, hypersensitive to the domestic political implications of a clearly enunciated doctrine, and concerned above all with avoiding friction with the great powers, they proceeded to evolve an implicit doctrine, a set of discernible rules of conduct and operational reflexes. This did not happen abruptly. It was a protracted process in which the Israeli political-military elite essentially reacted to Arab initiatives and then, retroactively, analyzed and articulated its own actions. If there was a doctrine, then, it often followed rather than preceded its own implementation.

The starting point was essentially an extension of previously held notions. Israel's self-image was that of a peace-loving nation. It accepted the armistice demarcation lines as final boundaries. It demanded that the armistice regime be regarded as a state of nonbelligerency, a temporary halfway house between war and peace. It repeatedly emphasized its desire to sign peace agreements with all its neighbors. Hence it did not envision itself initiating a war but, rather, the reverse: it saw itself encircled by hostile neighbors who themselves contemplated war against it.[53]

Since Israeli policymakers looked forward, somewhat wistfully, to a period of reasonable stability, if not to peace in the full sense of the term, they paid little or no attention to the question of retaliation if and when the Arabs initiated hostilities. The Israeli posture in these early days of statehood was thus patently defensive. Deterrence may have been instinctively assumed to be the ultimate goal. The term itself may even have been used occasionally. But no Israeli leader was aware of any need to enunciate clearly, as a proper strategy of deterrence requires, how Israel would respond to Arab provocations.

There were, however, two repeatedly announced ground rules. The first was that of reciprocity: peace would prevail on both sides of the border or on neither. The Arabs would be misleading themselves if they believed that they could indulge in hostile acts without expecting any Israeli response. They had the option of living in peace, but if they chose to reject it they should expect an Israeli response in kind. Second, if a war ever broke out, the Arabs should expect a vigorous and deliberate Israeli attempt to carry the fighting over to the Arab side of the border. Israel was small and vulnerable. It had neither the space nor the demographic size nor, indeed, the psychological capacity to sustain the effects of warfare on its own territory. Hence every war would be fought, if the Israelis were capable of having it their way, on the back of the Arabs.

In specific and concrete terms, then, the Israelis were telling their neighbors that the next war would be, from the outset, similar to the last stages of the 1948 war, in which the IDF was inside Lebanon and

resemble the early stages of that war, in which the Egyptian army was close to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the Arab Legion besieged Jerusalem, the Iraqi army threatened Natanya and Hadera, the Syrian army was inside the Galilee, and even the Lebanese held small chunks of Israeli territory.

What was not clearly specified initially was whether these principles applied to hostilities on any scale or only to large-scale wars of the 1948 type. It was not long, however, before it transpired that the Israelis intended to adhere to these principles as pedantically in the case of small-scale harassment as in the case of major wars. In 1950 19 Israelis were killed and 31 were injured by Arab marauders. In 1951 the figures were 48 and 49, respectively. In 1952 there were 42 fatalities and 56 injuries; in 1953, the figures were 44 and 66, respectively. This steady rise in casualty figures continued uninterrupted until the 1956 Operation Kadesh. All told, Israel suffered during the 1949–56 period a loss of 486 lives (of whom 264 were civilians) and injuries to 1,057 of its citizens (of whom 477 were civilians).[54] In absolute terms this was not a heavy toll for a country whose population was rapidly expanding beyond the 1.5 million mark. The damage, however, was perceived as extensive, not only in material terms but above all in terms of people's state of mind. Incidents leading to death and injury of Israelis by Arabs who had crossed over from the neighboring countries created a pervasive sense of insecurity. People became afraid to travel at night—even, in certain areas, in broad daylight.

In turn, the government rapidly became exceedingly apprehensive about the potential cumulative results of this escalating attrition. Much of the border population consisted of new immigrants who had been placed there against their will and who remained there merely because they had nowhere else to go. Their motivation to sustain the effects of terrorism was therefore as low as it could be. If Arab harassment were not stopped forthwith, it could lead to a collapse of the entire border settlement policy—ultimately even to a kind of social domino effect, with people running away from the periphery into the small and already overcrowded urban centers.

Initially the official Israeli response was restraint. Incidents would be reported to the U.N. Mixed Armistice Commissions, and the Israeli government would issue solemn pleas urging the neighboring countries to prevent such incidents from recurring. Meanwhile, in order to prevent the collapse of the morale of the victims of Arab harassment, the government paid special attention to them both materially and symbolically. Money was invested in a variety of ways: shelters were built; volunteers from the well-established populations of the kibbutz and moshav movements were sent to weak areas; and the prime minister, the chief of staff, members of the cabinet, the leadership of the Histadrut (the Israeli trade union movement), and others visited especially hard-hit areas almost every time an incident occurred involving the loss of life.[55]

When this combination of external restraint and internal fortitude led nowhere, the Israelis moved again, from *havlaga* ("restraint") to *tguva* ("retaliation").

At first retaliation was carried out clandestinely, in a tit-for-tat fashion. If insecurity was wrought by small bands of Arabs on the Israeli side of the border, then insecurity could be created on the Arab side of the border as well, using similar methods. At this stage, whereas the Arabs crossing the lines were for the most part acting on their own volition rather than in the service of governments, Israeli retaliation was carried out strictly by IDF personnel. Small parties of soldiers would cross the border, lay an ambush somewhere, cause a number of casualties, and then retreat. If Arabs burned an Israeli barn, Israelis would burn an Arab equivalent. If Arabs stole an Israeli herd, the Israelis would retaliate in kind. And if Arab governments denied responsibility for these activities from their territory, so did the Israeli government. The latter's retaliation was deliberatley calibrated to the scale and linked to the timing and location of the Arab act directly preceding it.[56]

This type of response, though flexible in principle, did little to solve the problem. In fact, the number of incidents and the numbers of casualties increased. Consequently, the IDF under Chief of Staff Makleff was tempted to institutionalize and strengthen the instruments of retaliation. The result was the formation in the summer of 1953 of Unit 101, a commando formation of forty to fifty nonuniformed men headed by (then) Major Ariel Sharon. Its sole purpose was to carry out intense sabotage and harassment operations on the Arab side of the border as a means of deterring Arabs from doing the same thing on the Israeli side.[57]

On October 14, 1953, the new unit overplayed its hand. In an attack on the West Bank village of Qibyeh, two days after the murder of a mother and her two children in the Israeli village of Yahud, Unit 101 left behind roughly fifty homes in ruin and sixty-nine civilian casualties. This was no longer "an eye for an eye" (flexible response); it had become "twenty-three eyes for one eye" (massive retaliation). Moreover, by deliberately seeking to terrorize civilians as a means of compelling governments to change their policies, this method entailed a variant of countercity strategy.[58]

The Qibyeh operation was carried out shortly before the appointment of Major-General Moshe Dayan to the position of IDF chief of staff. Dayan had been skeptical of the deterrent utility of the strategy embodied in the employment of Unit 101. He applauded the technical military aspects of the Qibyeh operation, but he became convinced that the rationale that had led to it was questionable. The result was a significant change of policy. From then on the IDF would openly engage in operations across the armistice demarcation lines and would attack only military objectives. The disproportion between provocation (by Arabs) and response (by Israelis)—that is, the emphasis on massive retaliation—would be maintained. But the emphasis on terrorizing civilians (a countercity strategy) would, in a sense, be replaced by a new emphasis on attacking strictly military targets—that is, on a micro variant of counterforce.[59]

The logic of this coercive diplomacy, whose effectiveness has been forcefully questioned,[60] is worth a more detailed explanation. In the first place, Dayan explicitly perceived these actions as part of a strategy of deterrence, not as reprisals in the primitive sense of the term. Israel, he argued, was simply too poor in manpower and too exposed in terms of its physical features to be able to rely on a defensive strategy. It could not possibly guard every house, tree, or irrigation system. Hence, although it had no territorial ambitions and was simply seeking to defend its sovereign territory from attacks, it had to maintain an active form of defense. Differently stated, the only way for Israel to defend its citizens was deterrence based on exacting a high price for every Israeli casualty.

Furthermore, although the so-called reprisals were small operations, they constituted instruments of a larger policy. The Arab governments had no incentive for stopping their citizens from carrying out attacks against Israelis. In fact, harassing Israel was a popular cause in the Arab world, and any government that tried to stop it would face certain domestic and inter-Arab risks. Against this background, if the IDF carried out a military operation causing the death of Arab soldiers and/or damage to Arab military installations, the Arab armies' ability to carry out their main duty was thrown into sharp relief. If the army in question did not counterattack, it would appear weak. If it did counterattack, it would run the risk of a larger-scale showdown with the Israelis. Given the Arabs' explicit and oft-repeated commitment to the cause of undoing Israel as a political reality, an Arab government capable of standing up to Israel would not be waiting for an Israeli attack. If it did, Dayan argued, it meant that in its own estimate it was incapable of standing up to Israel. If other Arab governments, equally committed to the struggle against Israel, did not come to the aid of the most recent victim of an Israeli reprisal, their lack of resolve was indirectly exposed as well. Reprisals, then, constituted an index of mutual deterrence, a method of evaluating the shares of the adversaries in the "threat exchange," of measuring the overall balance of forces and resolve in the Arab–Israeli conflict. In other words, reprisals were not merely instruments of primitive psychological satisfaction.[61]

The logic of Dayan's argument was seemingly flawless. As he soon discovered himself, however, it overlooked the escalatory impact of this policy on Arab conduct. Could a proud country like Egypt, with its aspirations for leading both the Arab world and the nonaligned bloc—could a proud Egyptian like Gamal Abdul Nasser, who was just discovering the joys of world leadership on a par with venerable leaders such as Tito and Nehru—really afford to concede weakness? Clearly not. Nasser, therefore, intensified the economic, diplomatic, and ultimately military campaign against the Jewish state. And he succeeded in exacting from the Israelis an ever-higher price. Indeed, at one stage in 1955, Egyptian *fedayeen* reached the outskirts of Israel's main city, Tel Aviv, and made travel in Israel so hazardous that all nighttime traffic between Tel

Aviv and Jerusalem, the capital, was restricted to army-escorted convoys. This situation was so alarming that Ben Gurion, for one, began to contemplate the seizure of the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, the very least that could be done to dissuade the Egyptians from continuing the *fedayeen* raids was, by the same logic, to escalate against the Egyptian army. This was manifested by a series of attacks on Egyptian military positions in the northern Sinai, in and around an area that, according to the 1949 armistice agreements, was supposed to have been a demilitarized zone (DMZ).[62] Nasser was intimidated, all right. Rather than withdrawing from this dangerous test of nerve, however, he turned to the Soviets for military aid. By September 1955, consequently, Israel was facing an entirely new situation: a distinct possibility that Egypt would be powerful enough within six months to initiate large-scale hostilities.

The result was an Israeli drift away from the second-strike posture it had adopted in 1949 and toward what amounted to a first-strike strategy. The change was not announced as a means of deterring Egypt. By this stage, it may well have been too late for the Israelis to play deterrence. They could conceivably attempt this by arming themselves to the teeth. But the French, who had begun to supply them with arms, would continue doing so only under conditions of strict secrecy. Nevertheless, even if the Israelis could have advertised their new armaments program, it is doubtful that that would have been enough to dissuade the Egyptians from carrying out their own program.

In the absence of an effective defensive option, Israel could either attempt compellence—that is, issue ultimata demanding an Egyptian withdrawal of forces away from the Israeli border—or prepare for a preventive war. The first alternative was hardly likely to succeed, given Nasser's euphoric and hypersensitive state of mind. There had been several intense Israeli attempts to seek a change in Nasser's position through negotiated political solutions. But all these attempts had demonstrated conclusively—at least to the Israelis—that the Egyptian leader was unwilling to meet Israel halfway or unable to do so or both.[63]

Against this background it seemed unlikely that the Egyptians would withdraw their forces from the Israeli border—within an area that was Egyptian sovereign territory—simply because Israel threatened to eject them from there by force. Egypt appeared willing to consider a partial disengagement, provided Israel agreed to withdraw the IDF a similar distance from the international border. Because of Israel's minuscule size, however, this either would be too limited to be effective as a means of conflict reduction or, if it were extensive enough to be effective, would entail a unilateral Israeli demilitarization of the bulk of the country's territory. Israel could in no way agree to the Egyptian counterproposal of mutual and balanced disengagement, and Egypt alone would not volunteer for or agree to be bullied (that is, compelled) into a unilateral withdrawal.

Nor was the second alternative—namely, waiting for the Egyptians to initiate hostilities—any more acceptable from the Israeli point of view. It would

expose Israel to the hazards of a war initiated by the adversaries—the very nightmare that had haunted them since 1948. It could mean a heavy toll (in 1948 Israel had lost some seven thousand dead, then about 8.9 percent of its population). Moreover, it could mean a protracted war fought, at least initially, on the backs of the Israeli population. Determined, once the 1948 war was over, not to allow another war to be fought on their side of the border, the Israelis had inadvertently chosen a strategy that would not permit an Arab initiation of war. Bluntly, when push came to shove, the only thing this principle could imply was what Israeli governments had attempted to avoid from the very beginning: a decision to launch a preventive war themselves.

One Israeli strategist who was out of power in those days, Yigal Allon, was brought by this realization to advocate a strategy of a "preemptive counterattack"—a non sequitur that stood, in fact, for an interceptive first-strike strategy.[64] Neither Ben Gurion nor Dayan nor anyone else in power in these fateful months of the spring and summer of 1956 ever used Allon's tortuous term. In practice, however, their own policy during the previous years had rendered Allon's ideas the most logical operational conclusion. Having adopted a strategy of escalation for dealing with low-level hostilities ("current security"), having caused the conflict to escalate, they could not continue to adhere much longer to a second-strike strategy concerning all-out war ("basic security"). Dayan, the chief of staff, realized this quite early in the process. Other, probably less perceptive members of Israel's military-political elite at the time were slower to draw the necessary conclusions or, it seems, reluctant to accept them. Consequently, the entire policy analyzed so far, complete with its force structure, threats, alliances, and—of course—force employment dimensions, became the source of one of the most divisive disputes in Israel's political history.

The Politics of Strategic Choice

A cursory overview of four decades of Israeli national security policy could easily lead to the impression that until 1967 that policy commanded complete and unshaken consensus among the Israelis themselves. It could be argued that only later, with the acquisition of the occupied territories in the course of the Six-Day War, did Israeli society begin to develop deep rifts. These showed with growing intensity during the war of attrition, even more so after the Yom Kippur War, and above all in the Israeli experience in Lebanon.

The evidence in support of such an interpretation seems compelling. Israel was highly successful in its first three wars (1948, 1956 and 1967), but less so in its later wars. This could be attributed to poor generalship, to a lack of motivation, or to both. On the face of it, however, the possibility of poor Israeli generalship appears unconvincing. After all, even in the 1973 war the problem was not poor performance in the course of the war but an intellectual

failure before the outbreak of hostilities. After this war the IDF performed exceptionally well on a number of occasions except, of course, for the war in Lebanon, in which the blame again could be placed on Sharon's deception.

The most plausible explanation for the overall decline in Israel's wartime performance, therefore, seems to rest somehow on an apparent correlation between domestic consensus and the ability to win wars. The argument is enticing in its elegant simplicity, in its emphasis on high democratic principles, and in its hidden opposition to wars. It is also not entirely without basis in the case of Israel insofar as the general public is concerned. There is little doubt, in fact, that the Israeli public began to show signs of fatigue and division only after the third successful war (in June 1967).

This, however, is not the same as saying that Israel had not experienced deep divisions concerning national security policy before 1967. In fact, both in the course of the 1949–56 period discussed in this chapter and in the course of the 1957–67 period, to be discussed in the next chapter, Israeli foreign policy in general and national security policy in particular made up the single most potent source of elite division. The general public, to be sure, gained only occasional glimpses into the raging debate at the national "high table." But the secrecy surrounding the making of national security policy was not thick enough to conceal the fact that the course, pace, style, and tenor of Israel's national strategy were critically affected by these divisions.

The common interpretation of the main axes of dispute in the 1949–56 period—namely, the policy of reprisal—is infatuated with the personal relations among the decision makers. Ben Gurion, Sharett, Lavon, Dayan—and (in the background) Golda Meir, Zalman Aran, Shimon Peres, and then Major-General Chaim Laskov—added up to a colorful gallery of personalities. Understandably, this reinforced the all-too-common tendency to relegate the substantive issues to the background and focus on rivalries, friction, whims, and peculiarities of individual decision makers. But although the role of personalities here, as in any political interaction, is of great importance, the temptation to overstate its importance should be strenuously resisted. During the seven-year interval between the 1948 and the 1956 wars, Israel faced an acute problem of national security. The Jewish state had just come into existence; it was still reverberating with the consequences of the extensive bloodshed of the war; it was struggling to absorb a vast population of bewildered new immigrants; yet almost without respite it had to deal with a growing problem of insecurity as a result of infiltration and sabotage.

Such a situation inevitably meant high stakes, and playing for high stakes is likely to be divisive. Should Israel accept border instability and Arab threats of a second round as a "normal" state of affairs in the same way that people resign themselves to the frequency of traffic accidents, floods, and typhoons? Or should the Jewish state rebel against this state of affairs and look for

ways and means of stopping it? If the consensus was—as it would be in any state—that this was an abnormal situation, should Israel turn to outside support or fall back on its own resources, on self-help, in order to stop it?

A tradition of thought dating back to Jean Jacques Rousseau predicts that in the face of a problem like this, most nations would ultimately turn to self-help. This means precipitative, preemptive, assertive behavior and, ultimately, a greater degree of insecurity for those who follow this logic. But despite the evidence suggesting that in the long run cooperative behavior is more beneficial, this school argues, it is logical for most nations to take care of their interests in the short run through assertive behavior. If they do not, they may appear weak; thus, rather than deterring their adversaries, they may well encourage them to take advantage of this putative weakness.[65]

The logic of this argument seems compelling, but that does not mean that every individual decision maker responds to every particular policy problem in the same way. In the Israeli context during the 1949–56 period, most decision makers ultimately could not challenge the logic of falling back on self-help. But whereas some leading decision makers came to such a conclusion quite early on, others were slower to grasp this logic or resisted its grim implications a while longer.

The quickest to draw the conclusion that self-help and assertion were Israel's best guarantee of obtaining a reasonable degree of security was General Moshe Dayan. During 1949–50 he was Officer Commanding (OC) of the Jerusalem District. Then, in quick succession he became OC Southern Command; OC Northern Command; head of G3 Division at IDF General Staff (and thus in effect deputy chief of staff); and finally chief of staff for nearly five years beginning in December 1953. Given this series of important positions, Dayan was second only to Ben Gurion in his impact on Israeli policy during the 1949–56 period.

Dayan was not a systematic planner. He virtually epitomized the Israeli preference for quick fixes, trial and error, and improvisation. He did not enter office as chief of staff convinced that war was inevitable, but he did proceed in fairly discernible stages as he developed his concepts of what the national policy should be. In the first stage he tended to believe that reprisals would be an adequate answer to the problem of infiltration, especially if they were on a large scale, directed against military objectives, and thus exceedingly painful from the viewpoint of the adversaries. The escalation in the reprisals and the Egyptian arms deal with the Soviets convinced him, however, that the reprisal policy as such had outlived its usefulness. The specific method he had proposed worked as long as it was novel. Once it had been repeated several times, however, the adversaries learned it and found effective ways of dealing with it. The result was a significant escalation, not only in Arab–Israeli hostilities but also in the cost incurred by Israel itself. When the ratio of Israeli to Arab casualties was 10:1 or better from the Israeli point of view, Dayan

considered the reprisals policy to be effective. When, however, the ratio was steadily declining until it plummeted closer to 2:1, as in the last few reprisals before Operation Kadesh, Dayan became skeptical of the efficacy of this drill as a method of fixing a high rate for Jewish blood—as he saw it. The question was how to deal with what the Israelis saw as the root cause of the reprisals—the harassment of Jews by Arab marauders. Dayan never believed that Israel could afford to yield—that is, to stop the reprisals and accept constant attacks as a normal situation. He was thus logically led to the conclusion that only something bigger—a large operation coming close to the scale of an all-out war—could solve the problem.

To be sure, Dayan virtually took it for granted that there was no miraculous way of forcing the Arabs to make peace. He assumed that the depth of Arab hostility was such that the IDF might have to go to war once each decade. Even though he started from this grim outlook, Dayan did believe that a substantial reduction in the frequency of small-scale, subwar hostilities could be obtained through Israeli action. Having failed to achieve this through "reprisals" (which he originally perceived as a cheap, ingenious substitute for all-out war), Israel's way to a solution might lie in a larger showdown. But since Israel's international position was weak and since there may not have been a domestic consensus on such a drastic step, further "reprisals" might be needed as a catalyst leading to war. Israel should escalate, the Arabs would respond with escalatory acts of their own, and within a short while a large-scale war would result anyway. In the event it could not be blamed solely on Israel, but since Israel would win it hands down—as Dayan believed—it would buy the Jewish state a respite, a few years in which the impact of a decisive victory would suffice as a deterrent against both small- and large-scale forms of harassment.

Assuming that sooner or later a major war would become inevitable and that it would have to be decided quickly in Israel's favor, Dayan was the first leading Israeli to challenge the utility of the Spatial Defense concept. The next war, he thought, would involve large, mobile, imaginatively maneuvering armies; it would not be a mere replay of the slow and poorly focused war of 1948. Israel did not have the resources to build both a mighty defensive capability and an adequate offensive power. In the event of a general war it should not preoccupy itself with the protection of settlements, since this would dissipate its military power. Instead, force should be concentrated and then employed in daring and focused maneuvers for the purpose of encircling and destroying enemy forces as quickly as possible.

Finally, Dayan thought, an Israeli show of force would constitute a more effective deterrent than would a docile reliance on a great power guarantee. The notion that an Israel that looked weak could obtain a security guarantee from a great power was incomprehensible to him. If Israel appeared weak, no great power would have any interest in propping it up and defending it. A weak and dependent image, in Dayan's view, added up to an invitation for international

pressures on Israel to cede the Negev to Egypt or to avoid reprisals as means of defending itself. On the other hand, if the Jewish state appeared strong and determined—an image that could be projected only through demonstrative acts like the reprisals—its appeal as a partner for outside powers would grow accordingly.[66]

Standing almost opposite to Dayan on most of these issues was Moshe Sharett, foreign minister since independence as well as prime minister during the period December 1953–June 1955. Like Dayan, Sharett had grown up in Palestine, spoke Arabic very well, had many contacts with Arabs, and felt that he knew how to deal with them. That, however, was more or less the extent of the similarity between the two men. Whereas Dayan had shaped his world view in the harsh, squalid conditions of a miserably poor Jewish village, in the Hagana, and in the IDF, where his contacts with the outside world were minimal, Sharett had shaped his view of the world in an Arab village where he lived as a child and through a constant exposure to the outside world—as a diplomat for the Zionist movement and as head of the Political Division of the Jewish Agency. Whether Sharett became a diplomat because of his personal attributes or acquired many of his habits in the course of this career is a moot point. What seems important, however, is the fact that he tended to be obsessed with form and appearance and to view Israel's needs through a singularly diplomatic perspective. Dayan, by contrast, was impatient with anything but real substance and tended to observe reality through a markedly strategic prism.

The most fundamental assumption guiding Sharett, it seems, was that Israel was weak and excruciatingly dependent on the good will of world opinion, especially that of the great powers. Without their support, the Jewish state would never have become a reality. It followed, Sharett argued, that Israel had to act in a restrained manner so as to avoid antagonizing these international actors. He had little doubt in his mind concerning Arab intentions. No less than Dayan, he was convinced that given half a chance, the Arabs would attempt again what they had failed to achieve in the 1948 war. But whereas Dayan was confident that Israel could stand up to the Arabs, even in almost total isolation, Sharett was full of forebodings. Without international support, he felt, Israel would be unable to hold its own.

Dayan, on the other hand, felt that demonstrations of Israel's military prowess would strengthen its international standing and weaken the Arabs' resolve. Sharett advocated "empathy" for the grievances of the Arabs and warned that a policy of force would only intensify Arab enmity and undermine Israel's international standing. It was important, he insisted, for Israel to play by the rules, to observe the rule of law not only internally but also in the international arena, to avoid steps that might give the great powers—either directly or through the United Nations—unnecessary excuses for punitive action. Assuming too readily that the world surrounding Israel was a jungle would, Sharett warned, act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Escalation and the threat of a showdown were not in Israel's interests, since, given Arab superiority in manpower, space, natural resources, and international standing, the Arabs could not be beaten. Ultimately they would prevail, and Israel should therefore avoid escalation to the best of its ability. It should never tire of signaling to its adversaries a willingness to seek accommodation and to pay for it with significant concessions.

Occasionally Sharett, too, would concede that the Arabs should be taught a lesson, since otherwise Israel would look weak and the Arabs' appetite for further harassment would merely grow. More often than not, however, he instinctively preferred to avoid military action or at least to postpone it, or—if that too was impossible—to limit it to the best of the IDF's ability. Suspecting the IDF in general and Dayan in particular of reckless adventurism, and rejecting almost out of hand Dayan's strategic logic, Sharett found himself time and again authorizing military action for the wrong reasons—that is, not because he was convinced that it was in the national interest, but because he feared damage to his domestic position if he dared reject the IDF's or his cabinet colleagues' urgings to resort to force.

Sometimes, indeed, the matter would become a subject of horse trading between Sharett, the prime minister, and his colleagues and subordinates. He would decline one or two successive requests for permission to launch a reprisal and then reckon that from the point of view of preserving his personal and political standing he could not do so for a third time. In the event, however, the bargaining would focus on the scale. Sharett would invariably argue for a smaller operation. Dayan or Lavon (who was minister of defense under Sharett for a short while) or indeed Ben Gurion (who became Sharett's minister of defense in February 1955) would attempt to convince him of the logic of massive retaliation. Sharett, without truly understanding the strategic calculus, would press for a more limited tit-for-tat.

The result was tragic. Convinced that he was wrong, his subordinates and colleagues would interpret his instructions in whatever way they saw fit, leave him in the dark about some of their actions or take advantage of his absence abroad in order to launch an operation which they thought was long overdue but to which Sharett had constantly objected. It was in such circumstances that, under Pinchas Lavon as minister of defense, Israeli Military Intelligence carried out the sabotage operations that led to the infamous Lavon affair. It was under Sharett as acting prime minister that Unit 101 carried out the Qibyeh operation. It was, finally, under Sharett (though in his absence on a visit to the United States) that Ben Gurion ordered Dayan to launch a massive raid on Syrian forces in December 1955.

Sharett was so adamantly opposed to any thought of using force that after the announcement of the Egyptian–Czech arms deal he found himself arguing even with some of his closest advisers in the Foreign Ministry. Avowed "doves"

(to use a term that was not yet in vogue) who fully shared Sharett's fundamental world view, these advisers saw no escape from a preventive war against Egypt. Sharett resisted this argument and proposed instead that Israel should threaten Nasser as a form of a bluff. When the topic began to be discussed by the cabinet, Sharett found few allies among ministers from his own party, MAPAI. He had a formidable ally in Minister of Education Aran. But members of the cabinet from MAPAI such as Minister of Labor Golda Meir and Minister of Finance Levi Eshkol, both already of acknowledged prime ministerial caliber, were prepared to consider the possibility of a preventive war. At the same time, Sharett drew important support from ministers from other parties. Thus, beyond the personal dimension of the problem, there was increasingly a complex political situation, whereby the prime minister and leader of the party that was the mainstay of the cabinet was at odds with his own party's emerging policy preference. This aspect became critical with the return to power, after a year's retirement, of the formidable David Ben Gurion.[67]

Ben Gurion's position was somewhere between Dayan's and Sharett's concerning the national security agenda. On the issue of great power patronage and a security guarantee, he had no quarrel with Sharett. He, too, was convinced that obtaining a great power security guarantee was one of the most important objectives of Israeli foreign policy. Both in private and in public Ben Gurion was occasionally scathing and denigrating toward the role of the United Nations, which he referred to, derogatorily, as "UM-shmum" (*UM* is the Hebrew acronym for "United Nations"; *shmum* is merely gibberish). He was also widely quoted as saying that it did not matter what the Gentiles said—only what the Jews did. In practice, however, not even Sharett was more careful than Ben Gurion to avoid clashes with major powers on issues that could seriously antagonize the latter. Indeed, one ground rule of Israel's national security policy that outlived Ben Gurion was exclusively his: under no circumstances should Israel ever engage a great power in war; and, when Israel went to war, it should do its utmost to ensure the backing of at least one leading power before the outbreak of hostilities.

If on this issue Ben Gurion was closer to Sharett than to Dayan, he was also in disagreement with the latter on the issue of Spatial Defense. The roots of the difference can be traced to variance in their respective definitions of the scope of national security. The establishment of a Jewish state, Ben Gurion insisted (thereby often finding himself at loggerheads with Sharett), was not due to a consensus in the United Nations but attributable to the fact that the Zionist movement had succeeded in establishing itself as a formidable reality in Palestine. Given this presence, Ben Gurion argued, a Jewish state could be created even against the wishes of the world organization. From this point of view, the U.N. Partition Resolution sanctioning the establishment of a Jewish state (as well as an Arab Palestinian one) was little more than an acknowledgment of reality, an ex post facto blessing.

It followed, Ben Gurion argued, that Israeli settlements, the building of the economy, the absorption of new immigrants, the strengthening of the IDF, and the consolidation of higher education and scientific research were the only ways to ensure Israel's existence. Whether or not the United Nations passed resolutions condemming Israel was of little consequence as long as Israel itself was continuing to grow and develop. Within this frame of reference, which put Ben Gurion poles apart from Sharett, the establishment of new agricultural settlements along the country's boundaries was a crucial dimension of national security. If these settlements were prosperous, they would endow the borders and, ipso facto, the society and state structure within them, with a quality of an enduring reality. Without such settlements, however, Israel would remain a temporary, dubious, questionable, illegitimate, insecure, and transient entity.

Thus Dayan's argument that more combat units in the IDF with more sophisticated weapons would be a better shield of the nation's security than a defensive "shield" based on armed agricultural settlements came up against Ben Gurion's broader definition of national security. To state their positions in a somewhat oversimplified manner, for Ben Gurion an additional Kibbutz or moshav on the border added a greater increment of security than another company of infantry. For Dayan, at least as long as he was chief of the IDF General Staff, the calculus appeared (not very surprisingly) precisely the opposite. Hence Ben Gurion would not permit Dayan to phase out Spatial Defense altogether. Despite the chief of staff's repeated pleas for permission to undo the NAHAL elite corps, Ben Gurion insisted that this unit should continue to absorb some of the IDF's prime recruits, hastily train them as paratroopers, and then assign them the task of setting up new frontier settlements.

If Ben Gurion was close to Sharett on the topic of alliances and at variance with Dayan on some aspects of the nation's force structure and deployment agenda, he was closer to the chief of staff than to the foreign minister on the thorny issue of reprisals. A long life in Palestine as a farm hand, a political activist, and subsequently a leader; an intense observance of Arab conduct stretching over decades; and numerous exchanges with Arab leaders had convinced him that only a forceful policy could persuade the Arabs to accept the fact of a Jewish state. In his view, if he were an Arab he would never accept an independent Jewish state unless and until he became convinced that this could not be prevented by force. The Jewish state, in Ben Gurion's concept, would have virtually to impose itself by force on an unwilling Arab world.

This did not imply an unwise reliance on force alone. Israel should be careful to spare its energies and accumulate force rather than squander it in a vain attempt to obtain a final victory over its adversaries. At the same time, to impress upon the Arabs that the Jewish state would not flinch and had the capacity to inflict untold punishments, to force them to reconsider their positions, to dissuade them from resorting to force themselves, Israel had no alternative. Its only course lay with a policy seeking to demonstrate military prowess

and striving simultaneously to keep the Arabs divided and incapable of converting their vast potential into actual power.

In moments of weakness Ben Gurion would wonder how many rounds of hostilities Israel could sustain before it would be subdued by the overwhelmingly superior Arabs. In the shorter term, however, he tended to share Dayan's confidence that reprisals and a general posture of determination, resolve, and military skill would ultimately change the Arabs' calculus. Hostile to the memory of Jewish humiliation and submission throughout two millennia of dispersal, Ben Gurion harked back to the days of Jewish statehood in biblical and Hellenistic times. From this perspective, he was enormously impressed with the youthful courage, skill, and esprit de corps of the IDF, as these qualities were emerging in the course of the reprisal era.

Yet, for all this, Ben Gurion was constantly torn between two opposing impulses. On the one hand, the policy of force that Dayan carried out with his blessing and under his guidance increasingly escalated the conflict; as a result, it was leading to the conclusion that a major showdown could not be deferred much longer. On the other hand, Ben Gurion was reluctant to drag Israel into a war that would tarnish its image and could easily lead to an open rift with the world's great powers. To solve the problem of infiltration and sabotage, he realized, Israel would have to capture the Gaza Strip or seize, as he proposed at one stage, the Hebron province of the West Bank. It would have to declare that it would not leave it without a clear Jordanian commitment to stop infiltration across the armistice demarcation lines. To save Eilat and the Negev, Israel might have no alternative but to seize the Straits of Tiran and hold onto them until an ironclad Egyptian guarantee to allow free navigation was obtained. To deal more effectively with Syrian harassment, the IDF might have to seize the DMZs and perhaps more Syrian-held territory. To thwart the Nasserist attempt to unite the Arab world and throw a noose around Israel's neck, there might be no alternative to subversive activity in Lebanon leading to the creation of a smaller, Christian-dominated Lebanon in alliance with Israel, as well as to the seizure of Lebanese territory between the Litani River and the Israeli border. All these actions, he also realized, were bound to have their adverse repercussions as well.

In a sense, then, Ben Gurion was torn between the world of Dayan and the world of Sharett; the greater the pressure of events to launch a preventive war, the greater was his agony. What made things worse was the fact that Sharett led a group of ministers who not only shared his views but also constituted a substantial enough bloc to prevent a cabinet decision to launch a military operation. Thus, while struggling with his own doubts, Ben Gurion also had a major political battle on his hands. He evidently assumed that before a military operation could be launched, at least two critical conditions would have to be met: there should be a solid domestic consensus for a military operation, and Israel should have exhausted all possibilities for obtaining significant great power support. Meeting both conditions was an immensely complicated and time-consuming task. Hence Ben Gurion seems to have launched a campaign for both even before he fully resolved actually to launch the planned military operation. His final decision on whether or not to go to war, then, depended on what he could achieve on the domestic and international fronts.

Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal consolidated Israel's tacit alliance with France. By bringing the British into the picture as well, it seemed to have guaranteed that Israel's Jordanian flank would be reasonably covered, too. The search for a secretary-general of his party, MAPAI, gave Ben Gurion an opportunity to solve his domestic problem. Having tried in vain several times to win Sharett's support for the proposition of a military campaign initiated by Israel, he apparently saw no alternative to the removal of Sharett from office. In a ruthless maneuver that sent Sharett into fits of anguish, Ben Gurion forced him out of the Foreign Ministry and appointed Golda Meir, who shared Ben Gurion's views, in Sharett's place. The latter never recovered from the shock and humiliation. But Ben Gurion, whose attitude toward most of his colleagues was more instrumental than personal, could be satisfied that he had eliminated the oppositon to a military campaign and ensured that a unified cabinet would follow him through thick and thin if and when he resolved to lead the country to war. All this took more than a year. The vicissitudes of domestic politics thus had a critical bearing over the manner in which national strategy evolved.[68]

The First Strategic Package

Israel's national security was initially intended by its leading architects to be based on what could be described, retrospectively, as a posture of deterrence by denial. The IDF would be based on a small kernel of regulars and a large reserve force. It would be mainly an infantry army, with elements of navy, air force, armor, and artillery in supporting roles. It would include a tightly knit network of border settlements, organized as Spatial Defense, to endow the country with a substitute for strategic depth. Such a system was expected to be politically buttressed by an alliance with one or another of the leading Western powers. Since in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 victory all this appeared adequate, there was no clear concept of casi belli. It was taken for granted that Israel would never initiate a war. If the Arabs were not deterred and if they were to launch a war—envisaged by Israeli planners as an improved version of the invasion of 1948—Israel would quickly mobilize and seek to shift the fighting to the adversary's territory as soon as possible. In the event of such a war, Israel would not limit itself to the repulsion of the invader. It would retaliate massively, seeking to inflict on the adversary the most severe punishment in its power.

This initial image of the preferred national security doctrine did not persist for very long. Technology and the arms race made the concept of an infantry-based army appear outdated. Gradually the pressure to increase the weight of armor, artillery, mobile infantry, and air force increased. Infantry remained the queen of the battle, but defense outlays constantly climbed, and the pressure to phase out Spatial Defense mounted accordingly. Simultaneously the Israelis discovered that an alliance with a great power was a pipe dream. The Soviet Union was quick to lose interest in Israel, whereas the West was slow to embrace it and presented unacceptable preconditions. By an ironic twist of international politics, France drew tentatively closer to the Jewish state in the wake of the Egyptian arms deal with the Soviets. But the French were divided in their attitude and would not go as far as the Israelis wished them to. Supplying the Israelis with arms secretly, and for their full market price, was one thing. An openly declared deterrent alliance that would make an attack on Israel similar to an attack on France itself was quite another proposition.

The inability to obtain a meaningful deterrent alliance gradually shifted the Israeli strategic posture to something resembling deterrence by punishment, a shift in emphasis nurtured at least as much by the repercussions of border insecurity. Having failed to stop Arab infiltration and sabotage through diplomatic means, Israel increasingly relied on punishments that were deliberately based on a disproportion between provocation and response (massive retaliation) and that for the most part were consciously directed at the adversary's military (counterforce). The decoupling roughly during 1953–55 of stratregy for low-level hostilities ("current security") from strategic preferences concerning full-scale war ("basic security") could not be maintained for very long. Ultimately the change in the force structure of both Israel and its adversaries, and the habits of thought and action acquired as a result of the experience with reprisals, caused a reappraisal of the strategy for all-out war. It led, specifically, to a shift from a defensive/denial second-strike posture to an offensive/punishment first-strike one.

Yet because of the lingering concern over avoiding friction with the great powers as well as of the fierce internal dispute in the Israeli political-military elite, the shift to a first-strike posture was not announced as boldly as a genuine and systematic strategy of deterrence requires. Israel increasingly acted on the assumption that it would initiate war if need be. Afraid to publicize this posture, however, or even to designate clear-cut casi belli, the Jewish state in fact shrank from tying its own hands through an irrevocable commitment. This streak of hesitancy undercut the efficacy of Israel's deterrence and thus, arguably, made an actual resort to force more likely.