Chapter 5

Conclusions

The astounding Israeli military victory in the 1967 war must be understood in light of the IDF's warfighting doctrine, its 1956 experience, and the subsequent changes the Israelis made in the structure of their armed forces between the 1956 and 1967 wars. A comparative study of the two battles of Abu Ageila serves as an excellent focal point for analyzing the fortuitous confluence of these three factors in the latter war. In 1967, the Israelis dramatically reversed their lackluster 1956 combat performance by seizing Abu Ageila in an exemplary fashion. The Egyptians, on the other hand, failed to achieve their 1956 level of performance. This was an unexpected development, since Abu Ageila held a central importance in Egyptian strategic planning. Furthermore, the Israelis attacked the position at night when Israeli air superiority, gained within the first few hours of the conflict, had no effect on combat.

The IDF fought with its own particular élan in both the 1956 and 1967 wars. Considerations of force, time, and space required the Israelis to develop a style of warfare based on an offensive spirit that emphasized the rapid completion of missions at all levels of command. The Israelis' lack of strategic depth dictated that the IDF take the fight into an enemy's territory as quickly as possible, while the possibility of fighting outnumbered and on several fronts compelled the IDF to plan for the rapid defeat of one enemy army so that it could shift its focus to another. To defeat an army expeditiously, the Israelis had to avoid an enemy's strength as much as possible and instead penetrate into its tactical and operational depth for a decisive battle.

For the Sinai, specifically, a victorious four- to six-day campaign must be executed in a single, continuous operation involving several battles that would feature coordinated military actions by *ugdahs* and brigades. To maintain unrelenting operational momentum, the IDF had to possess clear objectives, an appropriate military strategy, and a flexible, responsive command system at senior levels. Ideally, the Israelis' opening moves would be rapid, unpredictable, violent, and disorienting, throwing the Egyptian high command into a temporary state of confusion concerning the Israelis' intent. In this regard, surprise at the outset of the campaign was crucial, especially if it was achieved by deflecting Egyptian attention away from the main effort.

To wage a lightning war, Israeli doctrine and training stressed the principle that combat units in contact with an adversary should complete their missions rapidly to avoid surrendering momentum to the enemy. Israeli commanders were also taught to expect the fog of war and friction to create conditions that would force adjustments in any plan—no matter how good.

To strike a proper balance between tactical initiative and the maintenance of strategic aims required a flexible and responsive senior command that could work within the framework of a good plan and strategy so that junior commanders could exploit opportunities on the battlefield without jeopardizing the theater commander's ability to concentrate appropriate combat power at critical moments in a campaign.

In 1956, coalition warfare with the French and the British forced the IDF to adopt a war plan that went against the grain of its doctrine and military ethos. As a result of the requirements and constraints of the Sèvres Agreement, Dayan sacrificed mass and speed in exchange for the promise of British and French involvement on the second day of the conflict. In the war itself, the resulting slow pace of advance and the piecemeal commitment of forces impaired the IDF's ability to turn its initial strategic surprise into major tactical victories that involved seizure of key terrain and the defeat of sizable Egyptian forces. The IDF also failed to perform optimally owing to a number of internal problems. Chief among these were Dayan's low regard for the Egyptian Army and his concomitant Collapse Theory; doctrinal discomfort arising from the unresolved armor-infantry debate; and a loose Israeli system of command and control.

Dayan underestimated the fighting capability of the Egyptian Armed Forces in 1956, believing strong defenses such as those at Abu Ageila would collapse by being bypassed. Thus, when Dayan learned of the premature commitment of his 7th Armored Brigade, he opted to have his tank force bypass Abu Ageila altogether for a deep thrust into the Sinai—instead of first attempting to seize Umm Qatef. The latter step would have been more in keeping with Ben-Gurion's concern for avoiding a major campaign until the French and British initiated their participation. Then, when the Egyptian defenders at Abu Ageila exhibited more mettle than expected—even after being surrounded—Dayan, surprised and frustrated by the turn of events, pushed for a greater effort from his field commanders.

The doctrinal debate in the IDF on the eve of the 1956 war concerning the role of armor and infantry in large-scale maneuver warfare created confusion among Israeli commanders. Before the war, Dayan envisioned the Sinai battlefield as involving mainly infantry formations, supported by smaller armor units. Even though Dayan made a last-minute concession to armor in his assignment of a greater role to the 7th Armored Brigade in Operation Kadesh, Israeli armor was fragmented into small formations and never engaged in any major battle throughout the Sinai campaign. By the end of the third day of the war, for example, the 7th Armored Brigade had divided into three different armor task forces going in three different directions; yet none of these forces had seized any key terrain or defeated any sizable Egyptian force. The doctrinal debate concerning the role of armor and infantry needed to be resolved before the IDF could defeat the Egyptian Army decisively in a future campaign.

The Israeli command system in 1956 was still in its experimental stage for formations of division size. At the highest level in the operational chain of command, Dayan dashed around the Sinai from unit to unit to the detriment of operations at GHQ and the front command. At the tactical level, the *ugdah* had not yet crystallized into a full-fledged headquarters, and its

commanders exercised loose control over their forces. At Abu Ageila, the ambiguity concerning higher level command relationships encouraged the interference of the chief of the General Staff and the front commander in the tactical decisions of their subordinates. This intervention, however, brought little improvement to the tactical situation. In fact, coordination between brigades suffered as a result of this meddling.

After 1956, realizing that it could not attribute its poor combat performance to political factors, the IDF embarked on numerous changes based in part on its previous war experience. The Israeli Air Force became the premier service, capable of conducting preemptive strikes to gain the air superiority necessary for rapid ground support operations. On the land, the IDF solved its armor-versus-infantry controversy with a clear doctrine based on the employment of large armor formations in exploitation and deep operations designed to defeat an enemy's army in rapid fashion. With the demise of Dayan's Collapse Theory, Israeli planners took the Egyptian Army's fighting capabilities seriously and consequently devoted more attention to developing better techniques for assaulting fortified positions. Finally, the reserves underwent more rigorous training, and the system weeded out older individuals, who now joined combat support units. All these changes matured and professionalized the IDF so that in the next conflict, the Israeli Army could fight more in accordance with its warfighting doctrine.

Perhaps the key to the Israeli success of 1967 was the combination of masterful operational planning coupled with the interwar development of a better functioning command and control system for the front and *ugdah* commands. The plan for the Sinai theater of operations, in which speed was of utmost importance, contained a successful deception that focused Egyptian attention to the south, while Israel concentrated its forces in the north. The IDF expected to use its initial strategic surprise to seize two key Egyptian positions, in the process defeating the 7th Division at al-Arish and the 12th Brigade at Abu Ageila.

But the Israeli goal of conquering most of the Sinai depended on a judicious balance between the forward area battle and the deep battle. To win quickly against the Egyptians—especially since Israel faced the real possibility of fighting on the Syrian and Jordanian fronts—the Israeli General Staff developed a detailed plan for the first phase of the Sinai campaign that also sketched out a swift and coordinated shift to the next phase of the campaign. The Israelis cleverly linked the two key forward area battles at al-Arish and Abu Ageila with the anticipated deep battle of tanks in the central Sinai.

The brilliant part of the operational plan was the assignment of Yoffe's armored brigade to the route to Bir Lahfan. This move completely surprised the Egyptians and prevented them from reinforcing al-Arish. In addition to this advantage, the Israeli armored brigade at Bir Lahfan gave Gavish, the theater commander, the flexibility to support Sharon in the rear of Abu Ageila should the need arise. Thus, the Israelis placed themselves in an excellent position for the next phase of the campaign. The Egyptian 3d Division, which held the second line of defense at Gebel Libni, would face a two pronged assault—one from Bir Lahfan and the other from Abu Ageila. After defeating the 3d Division, the Israelis planned to drive into the Egyptian depth and defeat the 4th Armored Division in a great tank battle.

But the success of this plan depended on a better functioning high command than that of 1956. To effect this improvement, the Israeli high command, in exercises between the two wars, institutionalized the *ugdah* as the main tactical headquarters under a theater commander, who now possessed the means to coordinate the actions of brigades to achieve strategic aims. Lines of responsibility and authority, based in part on Laskov's concept of "optional headquarters control," provided for a balance between the maintenance of aim at the tactical level and the flexibility of command required for the decisive battle in the Egyptian depth. In this context, Gavish left the decision of whether to conduct a night operation to Sharon. Then when it appeared the Egyptian Army was in full retreat, Gavish met with his three *ugdah* commanders to plot the next, larger course of action.

In a short war, it was of paramount importance for the IDF to make the transition from the forward area battle to the next phase with an adequate amount of combat power and mass. The best test of the Israelis' war plan was its effect on the Egyptians. In the 1967 war, victory for the Israelis resulted in the destruction or capture of 80 percent of the Egyptian Army's equipment by the fourth day of the war. Moreover, the Israelis achieved this accomplishment without having to fight any major engagements with the 4th Armored Division at Bir Gifgafa, 6th Infantry Division at Kuntilla, the Shazli Armored Task Force at al-Matalla, or the 12th Infantry Brigade at Qusaymah.

After the seizure of al-Arish and Abu Ageila by the morning of the 6th, the Israelis were prepared to break through the second line of defenses and strike deep. Nonetheless, the Egyptian high command still had several options other than the general withdrawal order issued by Amer. For example, the Egyptians could have attempted a phased withdrawal from the Sinai spread over two or three nights; or they could have tried a hasty defense at the passes. Either course of action, if successful for even two or three days, might have invited superpower intervention to force an Israeli halt to military operations. Certainly, the Israelis would have suffered more casualties, and the Egyptians would have saved some face.

Despite a number of viable options, Amer panicked and unwisely ordered a general withdrawal—in one night—which caused the complete rout of his army. His decision no doubt stemmed from the shock of the rapid fall of al-Arish and Abu Ageila and from the seriousness of the threat to the Egyptian second line of defense and operational depth by Yoffe's presence at Bir Lahfan.

The stunning Israeli success stemmed in part from a unique set of Egyptian failings, in large measure self-inflicted. In the three weeks prior to the war, the Egyptians changed their war plans, command structure, senior personnel, and troop deployments in ways that undermined their army's ability to fight against a powerful foe. Consequently, widespread confusion resulted throughout the Egyptian Armed Forces so that by the eve of the conflict, the senior military leadership concerned itself more about events in Cairo than those in Tel Aviv. To unravel the sinews of a vulnerable Egyptian senior command, the IDF needed only to launch a bold and imaginative campaign that seized key terrain at the outset of war and threatened a penetration into the Egyptian operational depth.

Tactically, the Egyptians in 1967 had created flawed defenses at Abu Ageila in two key places on the northern flank. But it was Israeli daring and imagination that resulted in the exploitation of these vulnerabilities. The Israeli performance at Abu Ageila in 1967 clearly demonstrates that the IDF had devoted much time and effort to solve the pressing and complex problem of how to break through a forward tactical zone at its strongest points. Abu Ageila fell as a result of a small mobile group penetrating into the Egyptian rear at Ruafa Dam, a paratroop battalion breaking into the center of the defensive perimeter and destroying much of the Egyptian artillery, and an infantry brigade occupying the trench system from the north. The key to the impressive Israeli success was the ability of the paratroopers to disrupt the Egyptian artillery, thereby enfeebling a crucial element of the Egyptian defenses and undermining the combined arms nature of the resistance. Sharon's remarkable synchronization of his maneuver forces was paralleled by Gavish's exploitation of the entire theater of operations during the Egyptian retreat.

A comparison of the two battles of Abu Ageila demonstrates the critical importance of operational planning and a flexible command in the execution of a successful campaign designed to defeat an enemy rapidly. To win the 1967 Sinai campaign, the IDF established the necessary correlation and integration between the forward area battle and the deep battle, and only serious Egyptian mistakes obviated the occurrence of a climactic battle between large armor formations in the center of the Sinai. Inadequate or unrealistic preparations for either deep or forward area battles by attackers during an offense will surely result in the loss of the initiative to a well-prepared adversary and might even imperil subsequent phases of a campaign. The Israelis had learned by 1967 that to strike the enemy deep in a decisive battle first requires serious preparation, realistic planning, and imaginative thinking in the forward tactical battles.