

## Concept

# Military Activism

### Introduction

The concept 'Military Activism' refers to an Israeli political-security approach which was developed in the 1950's by David Ben Gurion and promoted disproportionate military retaliation as the most effective deterrence against Arab violence and viewed international opinion as peripheral to Israel's vital interests.

### Background

Israel's difficult geo-strategic position in the early years of the state<sup>1</sup> led to the evolution of two divergent schools of thought which revolved around Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, and the country's second Prime Minister and first Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett.

Military Activism – affiliated with Ben Gurion and IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan and influenced by Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Iron Wall Doctrine (see below) - is generally thought to have held the upper hand over the 'competing' strategy of Political Activism promoted by Sharett (See Concept: Political Activism).

The contrasting policies of the two approaches were heavily influenced by their differing attitudes towards the Arab states, the role of the international community and the correct balance between defense and diplomatic issues.

### The Ideological Underpinnings of the Military School

Military Activism was characterized by several components:

- **Defense Decisive, Diplomacy Subordinate:** Ben Gurion believed that the defense establishment should play a decisive role in the life of the nation and that strengthening the IDF took on overriding importance. Diplomatic initiatives were thought to have little influence on events and role of the Foreign Ministry was considered to be primarily to explain and defend policy, rather than taking an active role in shaping policy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Israel experienced Arab intransigence and international ambivalence. The country suffered from approximately 10,000-15,000 instances of infiltration. Along the Jordanian border alone 200-250 Israeli civilians (out of a population of 1.3 million) were killed and approximately 500-1,000 injured. Moreover, the rise of Pan Arabist ideological antagonism in the region made a political resolution to formalize the armistice lines as permanent borders much harder.

At the same time, Israel became increasingly isolated from Eisenhower's 'new look' American policy, which had begun to focus on strengthening American influence in the Arab world while the Soviet Union had abandoned its support for Israel in 1953. In addition, the UN's Mixed Armistice Commission (MAC) offered no effective solution to Arab infiltration. Benny Morris, **Israel's Border Wars 1949-56, Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation and the Countdown to the Suez War** (Oxford 1993) Ernest Stock, **Israel on the Road to Sinai 1949-56** (Cornell University Press).

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Sheffer, **Resolution vs. Management of the Middle East Conflict; a reexamination of the Conflict between Moshe Sharett and David Ben Gurion**, (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, Hebrew University 1980).

July 14th, 2009

- **Survival via Deterrence:** Military Activism was heavily influenced by Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Iron Wall Doctrine which argued that peace would only be possible when the Arab states internalized the impossibility of destroying Israel. The strategy thus promoted military firmness as the key to Arab acceptance.<sup>3</sup>
- **Military Retaliation:** This military firmness took the form of massive reprisals against Arab infiltration, based on the belief that failure to respond to Arab violence in kind was considered to express weakness<sup>4</sup>. Military action was considered a useful deterrent,<sup>5</sup> as well as constituting the only way to convince Arab armies to curb infiltration<sup>6</sup> and the most likely policy to create a political climate conducive to signing new, more favorable agreements to Israel.<sup>7</sup>
- **Peripheral Importance of International Opinion:** Ben Gurion believed that Israel was fated to be isolated among the family of nations and believed that the country needed to internalize that it could not rely on the UN, international observers or foreign states for its security.<sup>8</sup> In one famous line, he charged that “what matters is not what the goyim [gentiles] think, but what the Jews do.”

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Brecher, **The Foreign Policy System of Israel : Setting, Images, Process** (Yale University Press 1972) p284.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Moreover, a country in the Middle East should not leave the impression that it does not react’ Minister of Police Bechor Shitrit and Minister without portfolio Dov Joseph in Government session on deteriorating situation on border 24/5/53, in **Documents of the Foreign Policy of Israel** ed. Yemima Rosenthal (Jerusalem 1995), p198.

<sup>5</sup> David Ben Gurion's diary 28/9/56 in Michael Bar Zohar, **Ben Gurion**, (London 1978) p186.

<sup>6</sup> Dayan, Military Activity in Peacetime, **Ma'arachot 1959** Nisan p54 (Hebrew). Dayan also stated that “The only method that proved effective - not justified or moral but effective - when Arabs plant mines on our side [is retaliation.] If we harass the nearby village...then the population there comes out against infiltrators...and the Transjordan government is driven to prevent incidents...”

<sup>7</sup> Ben Gurion, in Report on the Situation on the Borders 2/6/53 in Morris, **Border Wars**, p193.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Gurion diary 11-18/8/53 Bar Zohar, **Ben Gurion** p247.