**Evaluating Dayan as Arena and Campaign Commander**

Dayan chose to command the Sinai Campaign in his own unique way that reflected his personality, for better and for worse. In this, too, as in many other aspects of his life, he provoked heated debate and conflicting charges. In the army, opinions about Dayan varied: some were awed by his unique military leadership skills, while others harshly criticized his conduct as commander. He was censured for having brought the 7th Brigade into the battle without authorization and subsequently allowing it to charge deep into the Sinai Peninsula. He was also blamed for the losses at Um Qatef, and the ill-advised deployment of the 10th and 37th Brigades. The fact that Dayan was unavailable at key decision-making moments was partly responsible for these failures.

Dayan’s overall tendency remained as it had always been – to be as close as possible to the point of engagement. He did not invent a new method of command; it is common military doctrine that when a commander is not in the command post, a substitute designated by the commander is authorized to act in his stead. This second-in-command handles the routine management of a campaign, implementing the commander’s orders as given; only the commander may change them through his substitute. This arrangement is designed “for situations in which the commander leaves the command post… to issue commands closer to the front, tour the area, conduct meetings, etc., but the commander continues to function properly and his absence from the command center does not affect his functioning; on the contrary, his absence ensures and strengthens it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Dayan availed himself of this practice to the nth degree. He was aware of the problematic situation his extended absence created at the command post, and felt he had to justify himself:

I am considering joining the units attacking Rafah until the conquest of el-Arish is concluded. For the first two days of the campaign, its routine management will be placed in the trustworthy hands of field officers (staff division) who have outstanding knowledge and judgment. I spent most of the first two days of the campaign in the field. In the evening, I returned to the command post, and remained in constant wireless communication with headquarters; the staff officers say this isn’t enough and that my absence from the staff disrupts the proper operations of work. They may be right, but I am incapable – or unwilling – to behave otherwise.[[2]](#footnote-2)

On another occasion, Dayan expressed his longing “for the good old days of simple wars. When the time of war approached, the commander would mount his white steed and the trumpeter would sound the call to storm the enemy.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Shlomo Gazit, who was by Dayan’s side, described his conduct on the battlefield:

I spent the four days of fighting closely following the campaign while in constant contact with the French representatives who were with us in the command post, keeping them up-to-date on the situation at the front. We did not see the Chief of Staff for those 96 hours. Dayan scurried from one force to another in the Sinai, while Meir Amit, the head of the Operations Division, stayed behind and ran the Central Command post and the war. Dayan behaved this way primarily because of his personality, and I am certain that he did not much care about military doctrinal protocol on the Chief of Staff’s appropriate location during fighting.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rehavam Ze’evi, the chief staff officer of the Southern Command, would later describe Dayan’s habit of conferring far-reaching authority on staff officers and the head of the Operations Division left behind in the Central Command post:

Other than Moshe Dayan, I know no other Chief of Staff who would have allowed his deputy or the head of the Operations Division as much freedom of action as Meir Amit was given, for good and for bad, during the Sinai Campaign. Moshe got up and went down to the front and didn’t come back for the next 72 hours until the battle was over. I was with him, as the chief staff officer of the Southern Command, until the conquest of el-Arish, and we didn’t have the faintest idea of what was happening at the General Staff. Back then, we used a single-side modulation device to communicate, and we knew nothing about the political front – what was going on with the French and the British, or what Ben-Gurion wanted. Now, in retrospect, when I ask myself how Dayan could have left the Central Command post in Ramleh in Meir’s hands for him to do all the work, I have come to the conclusion that there was both good and bad in his conduct. No staff officer likes having the commander breathing down his neck, but, every once in a while, every staff officer wants to receive confirmation that he isn’t straying from the commander’s intentions and “getting off-track.”

We stayed with Dayan for 48 hours… Dayan moved as far ahead as he could, mostly out of curiosity – to see, have a say, get unscreened and unprocessed reports. He also knew that this projected confidence to the troops. Soldiers in the tanks and half-tracks driving past would stop and applaud him. It was impossible to keep him out of sight, which was something he didn’t want in any case.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Meir Amit, the head of the Operations Division, who had to bear much of the day-to-day command responsibility and who had earned Moshe Dayan’s full trust and backing, complained that Dayan was always running around in the field and was generally unavailable. “No matter how much you plan, prepare, and coordinate ahead of time, the circumstances that develop on the ground dictate a different reality.” Above all, wrote Amit, “Dayan’s spirit hovered over the ground.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Indeed, the staff made several important – although not, it is worth noting, critical – decisions on its own because Dayan was incommunicado. In his memoirs, Uzi Narkiss, Amit’s assistant during the Sinai Campaign, described one such decision:

My natural place during the campaign was in the Central Command post… in an abandoned orchard near Kibbutz Na’an. This is where the Chief of Staff, too, should have been, at least in theory. But Moshe Dayan thought differently. He never even bothered to stay in regular contact with us. As a result, in those days, the burden of the overall management of the IDF fell on the shoulders of Meir Amit, the head of the Operations Division, and, in his absence, on me. On more than one occasion, Amit or I had to make decisions on matters that would, under normal circumstances, have been outside our purview. And Dayan himself would eventually become angry about some of them. On those occasions, he would say, “Well, what can you, back there in Israel, understand already?” and then, in hindsight, he would learn to live with our decisions.

On the first day of fighting, Yitzhak Rabin, Commander of the Northern Command, phoned me and said more or less that the Arabs villagers near Ayelet Hashahar are afraid and would like to be evacuated to Syria via the bridge at Bnot Yaakov. The Arabs agree, the U.N. agrees, and the Syrians agree. The only question is if we agree. After a second’s thought, I decided: absolutely, we agree. Rabin, who must have been worried that I’d get into trouble, said to me: “Uzi, maybe you should get somebody’s approval.” “I don’t know where Moshe is,” I answered, “and he’ll probably be back only late. Write down that the General Staff agreed. I’ll make sure to include it in writing in the war log.” And that’s how it went.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Shlomo Gazit, too, had to look for Dayan during the fighting, but according to him, it was Dayan who personally directed the field officers. Gazit added:

The change that Dayan instituted was that any operational plan made by the General Staff would not simply be imposed from the top down, but would be followed by a stage of planning by the field officers, in planning groups and command groups. He would sit in the forward command room; he would be physically present, on the front line, during the implementation of the plan… This custom was introduced in those critical years. To my satisfaction, and the satisfaction of us all, this conduct is prevalent to this day in all army units.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Dayan firmly believed that a commander, including the most senior, must be in the field. “You cannot know what war is from stories someone reports to you. If you really want to know, go into the field… Even someone who understand or thinks he understands what war is, to know it, he must see it, feel it – through field glasses or any other method.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Dayan spent most of the days of the battle on the battlefield. He had no patience for conducting the campaign from a command post. Above all, he wanted to be on the spot at the locations where, by being present and gathering his own unfiltered impressions, he could have an impact on the outcome. Historian Mordechai Bar-On, who served as Dayan’s bureau chief, explained that Dayan thought it right to be in the field both as a leader to rally the troops and as a military commander to make decisions at key moments. “In practice, in the field, in the battle, the outcome is determined by the fighters.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

During the campaign, Dayan’s daily schedule involved flying to the front in a light aircraft, staying on the ground for hours at a time, and maneuvering among positions with a small group of commanders using two command cars. Towards evening, he would return to the Central Command Post to provide updates and further instructions, after which he would go to visit Ben-Gurion, who was ill at home, to update him about the day’s events.

Dayan was present at several important events on the battlefield. For example, he met up with Division 38 and the 7th Brigade during the critical hours of its early charge, which he had not managed to stop. But when he met them face-to-face on the battlefield, he directed the brigade commander and the Southern Command commander. Later on, he joined the charge of Division 77 in Rafah. During the fighting, Dayan took personal risks, coming under fire five times. There were some who found this behavior was irresponsible and unnecessary.

Dayan could engage in this style of command, referred to as leading from the front or forward command, because the campaign had been planned in a way that created the ideal conditions for the command style he preferred. The campaign planning matched the political goals. Unlike classical campaign goals – destruction and conquest of territory – Dayan defined the goal of the campaign as the collapse of the Egyptian army in the Sinai Peninsula. To this end, the IDF was to reach the Suez Canal quickly while conquering some critical points, including Sharm a-Sheikh, along the way, while also causing the Egyptian military forces to retreat in a panic. One notable element of the campaign was the absence of a specific destination where the forces were supposed to converge, as is customary in such campaigns. Instead, each force was supposed to advance independently of the others and reach its destination in the general vicinity of the Suez Canal.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In 1956, brigades enjoyed a great deal of independence in battlefield decision-making, and the ranks above them only guided them to ensure that the brigades’ actions would comport with the goals set for them. The campaign Dayan planned required very little coordination, thus allowing the forces on the ground a high level of independence. Each tactical problem was handled separately, without regard for challenges in other sectors. Only in Sharm a-Sheikh was there an attempt to coordinate the entry of two forces from different directions to seize control of the area. The campaign was planned so that Dayan would be able to command from the front, and the general tendency was to rapidly improvise war maneuvers while advancing.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In his book *Diary of the Sinai Campaign*, Dayan explained:

We can build our action on units that do not depend on one another and whose command posts, which must receive reports and give the required instructions, are found within the fighting units. Should we exploit this advantage, we will – after the initial charge – be able to continue to fight Egypt before Egyptian forces have the chance to reorganize for the changes occurring on their front. I believe that we can conduct the fighting in a way that will not give them time to recoup after our attack and will not cause breaks in the battle. That is the basis for our plans. We will build separate forces for the main missions, and each force will have to reach its final destination with one battle, one breath – to fight and advance continuously from its breakthrough to the completion of its mission. I know that this approach is not suited to every campaign, but, in my opinion, it is correct under the current circumstances, with the arena being the Sinai Peninsula and the enemy being the Egyptian army. It is also suited to our army and the nature of our commanders. I can take an IDF unit commander and point out the Suez Canal for him and say, “This is your destination and this is the route along which you should move. During the action, don’t call me to ask for help with manpower, fire, or vehicles. You already have all that we were able to allocate to you and no more. Report on progress. You must be at the canal [within] 48 hours.” I can give instructions like this to our unit commanders because I know they are ready and willing to accept such missions and are capable of carrying them out.[[13]](#footnote-13)

But this command style came at a price. Gen. Haim Laskov and Maj. Gen. Meir Zore’a wrote: “If the spirit of the commander encourages knights on horseback to surge forward, it sometimes happens that these horses will not only run, but also kick, which is what happened with the 7th Brigade and at the Mitla Pass.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Shlomo Gazit assessed Dayan’s management of the war as follows:

My own personal opinion is that Dayan’s approach is correct and appropriate. In the short wars the IDF conducts, the General Staff’s job is pretty much done by the time the first shot is fired. The General Staff has organized, equipped, and trained the units to fight, for better and for worse. It has also approved the battle plans. Control and decisions, if needed during the fighting, are best made in the field on the basis of unfiltered information about the real situation. There, on the ground, together with the commanders, the Chief of Staff can have an impact and decide the outcome.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Historian Martin van Creveld, an expert in military command, had a similar assessment. He saw Dayan as an example of a commander who provides his staff with freedom of action to conduct routine command and control activities, while he focuses entirely on the forward command on the battlefield. In Sinai, Dayan’s presence helped push the forces forward. However, as noted, this method can have a cost in terms of confusion and mistakes, which, in fact, occurred during the campaign. Nonetheless, van Creveld concluded, every campaign must be judged by its results.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Dayan neither invented this approach nor was he the first to apply it. However, he took it to its extreme, and thus enjoyed its full benefits. However, to the same extent, he suffered its full drawbacks. The forward command style was applied by prominent armored corps commanders in World War Two, the most famous of whom were Erwin Rommel, Heinz Guderian, and George Patton. The method was first developed primarily by the Germans for various historical reasons, and it favored a war of rapid movement that would cause the enemy lines to collapse within a short period of time.[[17]](#footnote-17) The significant difference between Dayan and the commanders mentioned above lay in the fact that they served as field commanders who answered to another echelon above them, often at a remove of several military command levels, whereas Dayan was the supreme military commander, answerable only to the political echelon. Still, the size of the arena and the scope of forces if which the other commanders were in charge were not smaller, and at times, were significantly larger than those Dayan commanded.

The forward command approach in rapid maneuvering warfare relies on the mission command approach (the original German term is *Auftragstaktik*).[[18]](#footnote-18) The central tenet of this approach is that maximal decision-making authority should be granted to subordinates after the command echelon clarifies to them that their mission is part of a greater objective. In that context, the mission is always realized in light of the objective, and if the situation on the ground changes and the mission is no longer relevant, the commander on the ground is free to decide to cancel or change it.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Another aspect of this approach is the double command system of an Operations Division officer or staff head, who remains in the command post for command and control purposes, coupled with a commander in the field who is present to examine and assess the situation up close, have an impact at critical decision-making junctures, when timing is critical, and rallies the fighting forces. Successfully achieving this type of command system requires profound understanding and absolute trust between the commander and his staff leader. British historian Spencer Wilkinson described the relationship as being so deep that the staff leader is “the alter ego of the commander.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Military history is familiar with several such pairs, e.g. Gen. Herman Balck (Commander) and Gen. Friedrich von Mellenthin (Chief of Staff) who commanded the German panzer corps on the eastern front in World War Two; and the better known Gen. Paul von Hindenburg (Commander) and Gen. Erich Ludendorff (Chief of Staff), who commanded the Russian front in World War One.

The famous German Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, considered responsible for integrating this type of mission command approach into the German army, believed that most preparations and decisions are actually made before war breaks out. Later, most decisions are made by the field commanders. Moltke led the Prussian army through three wars at the end of the 19th century, and was victorious in them all. He rarely intervened in the course of a campaign, doing so only on those occasions when he felt his input was critical. Even then, his instructions would sometimes arrive at the battlefield too late. Ever since the advent of modern communications methods and the increasing complexity of military organizations and campaigns, commanders have been able to stay in constant communication with their subordinates, and have tended to get more involved in what happens on the battlefield.

It is imperative that the commander maintains the authority to make the fundamental decisions for himself and not confer the authority to make them on others. These include “decisions related to the objective, mission, factors affecting [the campaign, such as political constraints], operational concept, methods of action of our forces and those of the enemy, operational outline, operational plan, and operation’s order.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The commander is the only person authorized to make these fundamental decisions.

The fundamental decisions will differ depending on the particular geopolitical military context. In the case of Israel, where a war might be fought in several arenas or on a number of fronts simultaneously, the Chief of Staff is generally forced to make only a limited number of fundamental decisions at some point during the fighting. For example, on October 6, 1973, at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War, one fundamental decision was to divert the air force to attack the Syrian defensive missile batteries in the north instead of the Egyptian batteries in the south (Operation Model 5 instead of Operation Challenge 4). Another example is the decision to order the General Staff reserves, Armored Division 146 commanded by Moshe (Mussa) Peled, to the south rather than to the north. In the case of a single front war, such as the Sinai Campaign, there were not many decisions that needed the General Staff’s intervention. During the fighting, the Chief of Staff generally counsels and supervises the various commands and provides briefings to the government. In a single front war, there are very few critical decisions the Chief of Staff must make on the spot. Furthermore, a gifted Operational Division officer, such as Meir Amit, who was closely familiar with the situation in general and the spirit of the Chief of Staff in particular, was perfectly capable of taking over and letting his Chief of Staff move to the front to assess the situation with his own eyes. The Chief of Staff’s presence on the ground at critical junctures can be highly significant.

The most important military thinker of all time, Carl von Clausewitz, famously noted that war is the kingdom of uncertainty, coining the phrase “the fog of war.” Today, there is not a single military officer anywhere who cannot quote this saying, but few understand it in depth and even fewer are capable of operating in accordance with its ramifications. Today, the IDF’s Central Command is referred to as “the pit” and is located in the Kirya (Headquarters) in the center of Tel Aviv. It is equipped with the most advanced telecommunications devices available fed by the best forms of information gathering: satellites, UAVs, and advanced tools for monitoring and transmitting communication. The Israeli Chief of Staff can sit in “the pit,” receive very accurate information about every arena in real time, and conduct the campaign from there.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In Dayan’s time, none of this existed. While wireless communication was used, the devices did not always work very well and the situation assessment received from the battlefield was often fragmented, confused, and very delayed.[[23]](#footnote-23) Had Dayan stayed at the Command Center, it is safe to assume he would not have managed to get an accurate impression of the battle in real time; therefore, his presence on the ground was more beneficial than his presence at the Command Center would have been.

Dayan’s style of forward command, even if it less suited to today’s technological reality, is not without rationale or value. His style of mission command is rarely practiced these days because of fear of failures and errors and worries about possible committees of inquiry. Dayan, however, operated in an era in which he was free of the restrictive combination of modern technology and rigid social norms in this regard.

**The Campaign’s Lessons for the IDF**

Despite its errors and flaws, the Sinai Campaign was ultimately a great success. The entry of the 7th Brigade earlier than expected did not cause the political damage Dayan had worried about, and significantly contributed to the IDF’s forward momentum. The paratroopers’ troubles in the unnecessary battle at the Mitla Pass caused heavy losses, but it had no systemic impact on the campaign. The failed attempts of the 10th and 27th Brigades to conquer Um Qatef did not delay the campaign and essentially had no effect on it; and the positions fell after being abandoned by the exhausted, encircled Egyptian soldiers. There were other botched moves, which are to be expected in any large-scale military clash, but ultimately, all the objectives of the eight-day blitzkrieg were attained at the cost of 172 dead, three missing-in-action, and 817 wounded – far fewer than the estimate of 250 dead Dayan had originally given to Ben-Gurion.

In the post-war period, Dayan spearheaded processes meant to ensure that the IDF learned valuable lessons from the campaign. Shlomo Gazit gave an account of one meeting Dayan held:

Dayan said: “I listened to the debates for two whole days; I heard the many comments and claims made by the disputants who appeared here about what was lacking, what was flawed, what was impaired. And then I sked myself, ‘Wait a minute… Who actually won this war? The Egyptians or we? … If we did, how do we explain the huge gap between this phenomenal victory and the endless list of all the things that are wrong with the army?’ I can only draw but one clear, unequivocal conclusion: we won not despite everything we lacked but because of everything we lacked. We won because, in recent years, the IDF has been able to focus on what really matters – only on whatever can bring about a decision in war with the clear, unequivocal knowledge that we are wronging all other issues and discriminating against them, because they are not critical to achieving a decision. We did not spread our resources along all parts of the sector; we focused on what mattered.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

With this statement, Dayan expressed what researcher Yitzhak Ben-Israel calls “the force-building approach of the relative advantage.” As the people’s army of a small nation, the IDF will always suffer from a certain disadvantage. As such, Israel has no choice but to take the route of focusing effort on areas in which it can create a relative advantage, making conscious decisions to neglect certain components of the system in order to create a relative advantage can wrest a decisive victory from the enemy.[[25]](#footnote-25) In terms of having a relative advantage, certain clear lessons emerged from the war, first and foremost prioritizing building up the forces of the armored corps and the air force.[[26]](#footnote-26) The most surprising discovery of the Sinai Campaign, however, was the tremendous power of the armored corps,[[27]](#footnote-27) which led to a genuine revolution in the IDF. Uri Ben Ari, the commander of the 7th Brigade, who would one day become commander of the Armored Corps, wrote: “The outcome of the Kadesh Campaign… represents a revolution in the IDF’s strategic military thinking in general and in that of the Armored Corps in particular.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Haim Laskov, the Armored Corps commander who received advanced military training in the United Kingdom and adopted a strict British Army approach, and Moshe Dayan, the “partisan,” could not have been more dissimilar, yet Dayan admired Laskov’s professionalism and his vast knowledge of military matters, while Laskov admired Dayan’s creativity. Of Dayan, Laskov reflected: “It was said that administration was not his strong suit. Perhaps. But he passed the most important test of all: he produced bricks of force out of a miniscule amount of straw.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Dayan and Laskov had essential differences of opinion about the deployment of the armored corps in war. Generally, the disagreement between them is presented as follows: Dayan viewed the armored corps as serving a supporting role for the infantry. He knew how to operate armored troops in the modern manner, as had the Germans in World War Two, and have all other armies since then. Laskov, on the other hand, promoted a program whereby armored troops would be organized in independent brigades. The war in Sinai proved Laskov right. To Dayan’s credit, it must be said that he admitted his mistake, and after the war, he worked to transform the armored troops into a corps that would form the backbone of the IDF’s ground forces.

However, reality was more complicated at the time. Dayan felt that the equipment available to the IDF – light French AMX tanks and used American Sherman tanks – could not provide what was needed. His opinion was reinforced by the fact that during the army maneuvers, many tanks developed mechanical problems and most of them never reached their destination. Mordechai (Motta) Gur cited a senior commander, apparently Dayan, when he observed: “One would have to be a genius to believe that tanks, especially those that were shipped to Israel, would be able to travel all the way to the canal.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

As a result, like many others in Israel’s command echelon, Dayan felt that tanks, without support forces moving with them, such as motorized or armored infantry and self-driven (not towed) cannons, would not be able to seize enemy posts alone. The second limitation on deploying the armored corps was the decrepit state of the tanks, which made it impossible for them to cross large desert expanses. As we have already seen, the Pelet drill in May 1956, a combined armored troops and infantry military exercise that tested the capabilities of the former, persuaded Dayan and most of the senior commanders that the IDF’s armored vehicles were incapable of leading a significant maneuver in the Sinai Desert, mostly because of their mechanical condition.[[31]](#footnote-31)

After the drill, the Chief of Staff’s logbook noted the following:

The only tangible result of this maneuver was the last gasp of readiness of the armored troops in term of the tanks’ usability. One Sherman tank burned to a cinder and many broke down. But especially dire was the condition of the AMXs. Of 60, 40 are now out of commission… Were it necessary to operate all of the armored troops at the same time, it is highly doubtful that [the IDF] would be capable of putting more than 50 tanks on the battlefield.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In hindsight, the drills the IDF held that summer to prepare the three armored brigade formations for war, which was expected to break out in the fall of 1956, led to the almost total breakdown of these formations. On the eve of the agreement with the French and immediately thereafter, it was clear that it would be impossible to go to war in this state. The logbook from Dayan’s office noted:

The Chief of Staff issued a strict command banning the use of AMX tanks for patrol and other functions requiring long distance driving. If and when a technical way is found to keep the tanks from breaking down due to the dust and sand, the AMX should be viewed only as a mobile anti-tank cannon. All tactical movements are to be limited to changing firing positions.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Because of the problems that came to light during the Pelet drill, Laskov, who had outstanding organizational skills and, as already mentioned, was an enthusiastic supporter of making armored troops into a decisive corps on the ground, was appointed to rebuild the corps. His appointment prolonged and even exacerbated the argument between his and Dayan’s approaches. At the end of August 1956, Dayan decided to hold an extended debate in which General Staff officers would be able to share their opinions. Dayan’s position was articulated in a document he entitled “How Will the Armored Troops Fight?”[[34]](#footnote-34) The basic idea, explained in great detail, was to distribute armored troops among the infantry formations. Laskov, on the other hand, formulated a document in which he called for concentrating all the armored troops into a single division, which would serve as a strike force and whose main function would be to surge ahead and destroy the enemy’s armored troops. Another argument revolved around Laskov’s demand to provide the armored troops force status, similar to that of the Air Force.

The decisive debate, which took place on September 1, 1956, was chaired by Defense Minister and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the Director General of the Defense Ministry Shimon Peres. After the sides presented their positions and the General Staff generals discussed the matter, Dayan summarized the meeting by saying that Laskov’s approach had some good points, and Laskov, too, highlighted the aspects of Dayan’s approach that he found acceptable, although he was still critical of it overall.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In fact, before the war began, Dayan determined that the battle would be decided by mobile infantry reaching the targets while tanks would be brought by carriers. Armored Corps historian Amiad Bresner wrote: “The execution differed radically from anything Dayan’s doctrine foresaw.” The armored troops brought by tanks did well with the missions they were assigned. Bresner added:

It would be right to say that Laskov’s doctrine, which favored maximal concentration of armor within an armored division, was also not realized… Armored brigades operated in brigade settings; the two armored brigades that were relatively ready for action were split – one along each axis of movement – with a third armored brigade far from the scene of action… The action of the 7th Brigade represented a small-scale application of Laskov’s doctrine.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This leads to the question of why the IDF operated neither according to Dayan’s nor Laskov’s doctrines. The answer has to do with the enemy’s conduct and the battlefield reality that developed, as well as with it being another manifestation of the flexibility in troop deployment and local freedom of action Dayan gave his commanders in the field. In fact, in this respect, although Laskov criticized Dayan, he admired “his audacity and broad strategic vision.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Dayan’s flexibility of thought proved itself again and left a deep impression. Meir Zore’a (Zaro) said of Dayan: “At the right moment, he understood that what those crazy people had said about armored troops was real and therefore ordered that it be implemented.”[[38]](#footnote-38) As early as November 2, as the key battles in Sinai were ending, Dayan realized that an armored revolution had occurred in the IDF, and, at a General Staff meeting, he said: “With all due respect to the 10th and 11th Brigades, it must be said that the armored troops did most of the work… All actions to date were undertaken by means of armored troops and planes.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

Years later, Dayan recalled that time as follows:

I can say that the question of how to operate the armored forces did come up. I, Moshe Dayan from Nahalal, didn’t know about it. For me, the infantry was the “belle of the ball” and the function of everyone else was to assist her… But when cannons became mobile and didn’t delay anything… that was something else… The armored forces are an independent force and, instead of the armored troops assisting the infantry, an inverse situation was created. The armored forces are an independent force [that] needs some assistance, including artillery and to a certain extent, assistance from the infantry.[[40]](#footnote-40)

However, beyond any of this, the foremost lesson Dayan learned from the war in Sinai was the importance of speed. And he again came to the realization that, in war, a commander must be personally present on the battlefield.[[41]](#footnote-41) The Sinai Campaign also proved the advantages of taking a proactive stance, such as beginning a preventive war or landing a preliminary blow, an approach that was used in the next decade in the Six Day War. The conclusion was that in the future, too, wars would be short because of the political component and the pressure exerted by the world powers. Another factor that dictated the need for a short war was the use of the reserves, which had been deployed for the first time. These constraints led to planning a campaign that would lead to a decisive and rapid collapse of the enemy. A year after the Sinai Campaign, Dayan spoke in favor of force building based on the relative advantage principle,[[42]](#footnote-42) saying: “I’m for us building our force in the near future on offense and strong, rapid, execution capabilities rather than on defense… We must focus our preference of one at the expense of the other. To satisfy all – that is not my objective.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

At a gathering of the senior command echelon that took place on December 27, 1956, shortly after the Sinai campaign, Dayan stressed the importance of speed in battle. Dayan felt that speed was the most significant advantage the IDF had over the Arab armies. He warned that speed might offset superfluous planning that could create unnecessary burdens and cause the army to focus on the marginal instead of on the central issues. Over and over again, he expressed the concern that the lesson from the Sinai Campaign might result in overplanning. He was also bothered by the issue of the ranks, which, according to Dayan, had to be able to keep up with the maneuvering force and not the other way around.[[44]](#footnote-44) Dayan added a further warning: the Sinai Campaign was atypical, because it ran more or less according to plan.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Dayan was afraid that the orderly procedures and logistical forces would stop the fighting forces, the knights on horseback he so favored and nurtured. It would seem that he feared procedures that might hem him in and force him to act according to orderly procedures formulated by the command and control chain, and not allow him to maneuver this way or that, as he was used to doing. He also worried about overplanning, which could undermine improvisation and initiative. In practice, in the Sinai Campaign, the maneuvering force advanced rapidly and the logistical forces had trouble keeping up. Dayan was afraid that the maneuvering forces would be subordinated to the logistical forces, rather than the other way around.[[46]](#footnote-46)

On an ethical level, Dayan rebuked the commanders for poor treatment of prisoners of war, including shootings, considering such behavior damaging to both Jew and Arab. It could damage the Arabs’ opinion about Israel and the possibility that the peoples would be able to live side-by-side in peace in the future. He also felt it harmed Israeli society and could corrupt the country’s youth. The issue of looting posed another ethical problem for Dayan, who emphasized that: “Anyone who brings [as much as] a watch home is like someone sticking a knife into the body of the IDF.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

As Chief of Staff, Dayan was mainly responsible for building up the army’s forces and for its optimal operation in wartime. When he assumed the position, the IDF was at the lowest point in its history. Three years of building up the forces and commander training later, when Dayan was leaving the post, the IDF proved that it could take the Sinai Peninsula in eight days, parachute a paratrooper force deep into enemy territory, and operate armored units that crossed hundreds of kilometers of desert terrain. Moreover, the IDF proved itself capable of conducting joint air and ground battles and executing special operations based on intelligence. As Dayan said, the Sinai Campaign “gave the IDF its wings.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Dayan laid all the foundations for building the forces, which were continued and expanded during Haim Laskov’s and Yitzhak Rabin’s tenures as Chief of Staff, a fact that became amply evident in the Six Day War. According to no less than Ezer Weitzman, the head of the Operations Division during that war: “In terms of the ground armies, there is no doubt that the action in 1956 contributed most of the knowledge and experience in attaining the lightning-speed victory in 1967.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

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5. Shahar, 1992, pp. 160–161. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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36. Bresner, 1999, p. 410–411. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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