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# MISSION COMMAND

in the

# Israel Defense Forces

Edited by Brig. General Gideon Avidor



Blue Ridge | Cumming | Dahlonega | Gainesville | Oconee



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# Introduction

Brig. General Gideon Avidor

## Command and Mission Command

The dictionary definition of “command” presents variations on the theme of “authority,” however, the idea of “command” is much more complex. According to the dictionary, command can only exist when other people carry out the instructions issued by a commander. Indeed, command involves not only authority but also action.

Military command generally focuses on a mission with clearly defined objectives that must be achieved through coordinated activities. Because the commander is responsible for achieving these goals, command also involves responsibility.

Command (both authority and responsibility) has been demonstrated throughout history according to a variety of techniques. In the last decade, the “mission command” method has become the most popular mantra or buzzword.

Preparing an army for war is a process that takes many years. It involves building the force and developing and training officers and soldiers for battle. Each army does so according to its own heritage and in accordance with its own national and local culture.

Like any other army, the Israel Defense Forces (I.D.F.) has dealt with mission command over the years in its own unique way. The present volume will demonstrate how, for the I.D.F., mission command is not merely a technique, but a culture.

## Shaping the I.D.F.'s Battle Doctrine

When an army prepares its officers, a significant gap occurs between slogans and methods and reality. In some areas, this gap is objective—a result of lack of knowledge, uncertainty, or the inability to know the enemy sufficiently. In others, it is subjective and due to the army personnel themselves.

In most regular armies, the accepted procedure is that the battle doctrine is written by experienced officers in the army's headquarters and distributed by the general staff to units for their application. This doctrine is updated periodically or as the result of an exceptional occurrence, such as during the impact of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Armies are constructed hierarchically. Large organizations, like armies, who engage in such complex activities as warfare cannot function properly without a hierarchical structure and discipline. This is true of the I.D.F., but we are also a growing army lacking a historical tradition.

This has its advantages and disadvantages. Despite being constructed to run along normative lines, the I.D.F. is unique, as will be elaborated on in this collection. For now, we will state that “unofficially, the I.D.F. promote[s] decentralized command, also called ‘mission command’” (Finkel, 2014).

This approach is based on multiple assumptions. The battlefield is fraught with uncertainty, and often the best solution is to afford maximum independence to junior officers. This thought is then furthered by the premise that these officers have the best knowledge of the mission and therefore will do whatever is necessary to complete it successfully (Finkel, 2011). In 2013, the I.D.F. officially proclaimed mission command to be its preferred command style.

Over the years, the I.D.F. has fought in six conventional wars (in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and 2006) with the participation of large formations such as brigades and divisions. Between those wars, the I.D.F. has continually confronted terrorist organizations and faced escalating tensions along Israel's borders. These activities were generally on a

low tactical level of limited operations nature, including operations in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip (during 2002, 2008, 2010, and 2014). The I.D.F. refers to these operations as “campaigns between wars” and considers them ongoing threats that must be dealt with in a manner that is a total departure from conventional warfare.

There is a fundamental difference between commanding an army unit during a war and the required preparation, training, and other activities “between the wars,” when there is no meaningful enemy present. During “between the wars” training, the effort invested in supervision, management, and accompanying tasks is greater than that devoted to big formation operations.

The commander’s responsibilities in periods of preparation are more restricted than in wartime. During preparations, they are surrounded by countless supervisors, managers, staff officers, and advisors and are required to explain their activities almost as much as does the objectives they want to achieve. In battle, the commander is measured almost exclusively by their achievements and is rarely called upon to offer explanations about the ways they operate—except after failed operations. Thus, we often encounter a gap between a commander’s behavior at routine times versus on the battlefield. Every army faces the problem of narrowing this gap and successfully training commanders in peacetime to function in wartime.

In calm periods, the hierarchical, bureaucratic military system functions in full force. In wartime, the situation is different. The transition from routine to war constitutes a major difficulty, one that requires time to overcome as efficiently as possible. Commander and forces training intend to ease the process; without that, it will be difficult to apply mission command on the battlefield. There might be isolated cases of exceptional commanders who successfully manage to make such application, but the command and control system will not be capable of sustaining it over time if not prepared in advance. Thus, despite long periods of routine

and limited operations, the I.D.F. attempts to inculcate mission command principles, even if it does not always apply them.

The Israel Defense Forces came into being as a people's army "in motion." It had its beginnings in the midst of a war (1948) based on concepts of underground armies, partisans and Special Forces. The functional abilities of its officers in battle were (and are) beyond anything else due to the training and performance throughout their careers. Traditionally, I.D.F.'s battle doctrine has been determined on the field. A maneuver or idea that succeeded in the field was subsequently presented to the General Staff and established as compulsory doctrine. Alterations to doctrine also originate in the field, as new requirements or methods engender temporary doctrine that later made permanent.

Since its foundation, the I.D.F. has developed and advanced commanders based on functional-operational abilities rather than academic or intellectual ones, which are important in themselves, but not obligatory. Officers who lack a high educational level will acquire it during their army service with the I.D.F.'s help.

Attaining commander status in the I.D.F. is based on the principle of rising up through the ranks. This means selecting soldiers for command positions based on their proven abilities at lower level—one step at a time—and on their evident desire to pursue a military career. This system is a departure from the accepted practice in most of the world's armies, which fill officer ranks according to selection processes that take place before recruitment.

Attaining commander status in the I.D.F. depends on one undergoing proper training based on active service. From the lowest levels, the system for selecting commanders, again, heavily relies on proven ability: a section commander will be chosen from among the best soldiers; an officer will be chosen for advanced training from among the most successful petty officers; an officer will be promoted based on their performance "in the field." Senior commanders must serve as junior officers in relevant

positions beforehand; a battalion commander must first have commanded a company. Every promotion and every additional training course will depend on proof of ability, unrelated to family background, social class, education or ethnic roots. Everybody begins at the bottom.

From the beginning, the I.D.F. adopted mission command as its preferred approach. It taught mission command in all command-training courses and emphasized it in every drill, even if it's not always applicable in practice. Commanders are expected to act according to this principle, but in low intensive operations or those operations subject to public opinion—and most military activities between wars fit those categories—the higher echelons might limit it. In the commanders' reports presented below, such tensions frequently occur.

In wartime, the transition to mission command is natural and continuous. Very few I.D.F. commanders will wait for instructions from above when faced with a battle situation. A striking example of this may be found in the memoirs of Yoram Yair, the commander of the 35th Battalion during the First Lebanon War in 1982 (Yair, 1990).

## Mission Command in the I.D.F.

Mission command is a command and control strategy within the broader context of leadership. The present volume deals with this method as it applied in the I.D.F. Like any topic that falls within the province of behavioral sciences and deals with interpersonal relations, mission command cannot be defined mathematically or isolated from the culture of the society in which it is practiced. Because of the vast differences between how it is applied in different countries, the I.D.F. model is fundamentally different from the American, German, British, or Australian one.

These differences stem from education toward excellence at home and at school, where the schools, colleges, and universities expect the students to surpass the teacher. The inculcation of this approach in the I.D.F. begins in junior officer training courses and is widely discussed

(mainly in periods between wars) until it is well known and accepted as the norm. Every commander strives to realize this goal if only they are allowed to do so; if they are not hindered on the way, it is the natural path they will choose. An accepted starting-off point among junior I.D.F. commanders is that, in their kitbags, there is a general's baton and, given the chance, they will prove the appropriateness of this gear. Until then, they will follow orders and do their best to successfully complete missions as ordered by their immediate superiors.

This educational principle states that the commanding officer will determine their intention and dictate the mission, together with the limitations and contingencies imposed on them by the higher ranks. If not instructed otherwise, the junior commander will act according to mission command. They will not wait for instructions from above and, even when given such instructions, will frequently suggest improvements to the original plan or a plan of their own. Such principles are evident in the texts that appear below; whether written by commanders who have experienced active service or by military theoreticians, they all deal with the nature of mission command and how it is applied and in which situations.

## Mission Command and Leadership

Mission command and leadership are inseparable. Whereas leadership deals with the individual's ability to inspire people to carry out their commands, mission command deals with applying leadership when activating a unit or a formation. Leadership might be applied in many ways and styles according to the leader's personality. The question of whether this leadership is inborn or acquired by learning is irrelevant to our discussion. Since it takes place within an operational organization, military leadership includes authority and responsibility for performing missions.

Since expectations from commanders are absolute in wartime, they tend to use their authority to direct subordinates' activities, keeping control over them "to avoid mishaps." Subordinates expect to receive clear,

unequivocal orders according to which they plan their next move, with very narrow margins in which to do so. Mission command widens these margins considerably, while still relying on authoritative and professional leadership; indeed, it cannot be effective without leadership.

The mission command approach places the responsibility for carrying out a mission on the shoulders of the lower level commander, as they are the most conversant with conditions and local opportunities. If the commander possesses the qualities necessary to carry out their plans, and the motivation to act in the best manner for achieving their goals, they should be supplied with the ways and means to do so in their own way.

The senior commander is required to clearly define their intentions, ensure that their subordinate understands them correctly, enable their junior officers to carry out their plans, and should support them in doing so. This does not lessen the senior commander's responsibility, as the junior commander's mission is on their shoulders, and the commander must ensure that it is fully carried out. The commander does this through supervision of battle developments and supportive intervention if necessary. For this approach to work, there must be a close, trusting relationship among commanders at all levels.

The senior commander must remember that the emphasis is on carrying out the mission and that any plan is a good one as long as it overcomes its weak points and reaches its objectives. Any problem has more than one solution and commanders should choose the best one, no matter who suggests it.

Mission command is also directed at easing mental pressure on the commander. This leadership style entails "loosening the reins," while giving junior commanders the sense that they are trusted and can function according to their own ideas. This can elevate their motivation and dedication to the mission to new heights.

Mission command demands a high level of professionalism, leadership, and mutual dependence among command teams. Consequently,

intensive commander training must take place before mounting operational missions. Many prior conditions are necessary to produce good commanders, including familiarity with battle doctrine, command and control theory, and military jargon. Commanders must be well-acquainted with and trust the subordinates and soldiers under their command. They must demonstrate patience with juniors and a willingness to absorb their mistakes. The Israel Defense Forces have been grappling with these issues since its establishment. It was founded in an unconventional manner, and its spirit persists to the present day.

### What Does the Future Hold?

Since I.D.F. commanders rise through the ranks in a prolonged track based on operational performances, they have already acquired considerable insights and experience when they arrive at the higher command levels. Mission command accompanies them the entire way, and their expectations from subordinates and their behavior in any framework is influenced by this approach. In addition, when circumstance causes them to act independently, mission command is always present in their deliberations.

As long as a tradition continues of shaping battle doctrine during operations and afterwards by the designated staff centers, the spirit of mission command will continue to prevail. Like any army, the I.D.F. demands routine activity, including planning that takes place according to fixed rules, but, when deemed necessary, the establishment will support junior officers acting according to mission command.

In the I.D.F. mission command is a well-rooted cultural tradition. It is difficult to apply in peacetime, but it is still in everyone's consciousness and supported by the chain of command. When it is relevant to circumstances, it is the natural, accepted solution.

### The Present Volume

This book presents mission command in the I.D.F. from variety of standpoints during various periods, including commanders' deliberations

about how to apply it in specific situations. We present the topic through the eyes of I.D.F. commanders at multiple levels of seniority and from different generations. We can see differences in adaptation to conditions at different periods, and can participate in their dilemmas, but the central track has always been to strive toward mission command as the preferred leadership style.

In the background stands the army framework encouraging mission command on all levels. The connecting thread running through this collection is that the insights are from combat leaders in the field, as they are more interested in finding practical ways of applying this approach rather than analyzing it theoretically. The theory came second, as a necessary response to explain summarize what had occurred in the field.

The book is divided into four sections:

- Section 1 describes the theory of mission command in the I.D.F. in the eyes of scholars. It contains three academic studies and one study on theory and practice from a former Chief of the Navy.
- Section 2 provides historical views on the struggle between concepts that were part of the I.D.F. build-up efforts during its early days. These ideas include Western militaries regulations versus Special Operations improvisation and more.
- Section 3 moves from the theoretical to the practical, with commanders giving their insights based on their field experience. These commanders include first-star offices at the GHQ level with a wider perspective than that of second field commanders, who derived their understanding from current field experience.
- Section 4 explores mission command in battles, including real life scenarios from commanders, staff, and warriors fighting in real life battles.
- Section 5 looks to the future and discusses mission command in the Information Age.

# Appendix A



# Terminology

**close support**—The action of the supporting force against targets or objectives that are sufficiently near the supported force as to require detailed integration or coordination of the supporting action.

**combat information**—unevaluated data, gathered by or provided directly to the tactical commander, which, due to its highly perishable nature or the criticality of the situation, cannot be processed into tactical intelligence in time to satisfy the user's tactical intelligence requirements.

**combat power**—The total means of destructive and/or disruptive force which a military unit/formation can apply against the opponent at a given time.

**command and control system**—The facilities, equipment, communications, procedures, and personnel essential to a commander for planning, directing, and controlling operations of assigned and attached forces pursuant to the missions assigned.

**command and control (C2)**—The exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of the mission. Command and control functions are performed through an arrangement of command and control systems.

**commander's intent**—A concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired end state. It may include the commander's assessment of the adversary commander's intent and an assessment of where and how much risk is acceptable during the operation.

**mission command**—The preferable command method is mission command. It assumes that every commander is best suitable to perform the mission at their level, in their sector, and with their forces. The higher-level commander dictates the mission goal and what it envelopes (resources and restrictions). The subordinate commander needs to decide and act to achieve their part of the mission. In certain conditions, mission command is replaced by detailed command in which the higher echelon dictates the methods on carrying the mission as well. (Ground Forces Command, *Tactical leadership at the Ground Forces*, 2012, p.22)

**mission statement**—A short sentence or paragraph that describes the organizations essential task (or tasks) and purpose. A clear statement of the action to be taken and the reason for doing so. The mission statement contains the elements of who, what, when, where, and why, but seldom specifies how.

**mission type order**—(1) An order issued to a lower unit that includes the accomplishment of the total mission assign to the higher headquarters. (2) An order to a unit to perform a mission without specifying how it is to be accomplished.

**mutual support**—That support which units render each other against an enemy, because of their assigned tasks, their position relative to each other and to the enemy, and their inherent capabilities.

**graphic order**—Operation order in which major parts appears in graphic format rather than in words. (I.D.F. *Lexicon*, 1998, p. 510)

**standard operating procedure (SOP)**—A set of instructions applicable to those features of operations that lend themselves to a definite or standardized procedure without loss of effectiveness.

# Abbreviations

<b>AO</b>	area of operations
<b>AOI</b>	area of interest
<b>AOR</b>	area of responsibility
<b>ATTP</b>	Army tactics, techniques, and procedures
<b>C2</b>	command and control
<b>CCIR</b>	commander's critical information requirement
<b>CIE</b>	collaborative information environment
<b>CO</b>	cyberspace operations
<b>COA</b>	course of action
<b>COG</b>	center of gravity
<b>CONOPS</b>	concept of operations
<b>CONPLAN</b>	operation plan in concept format
<b>COP</b>	common operational picture
<b>IO</b>	information operations
<b>ISR</b>	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
<b>NETOPS</b>	network operations
<b>OPCON</b>	operational control
<b>OPLAN</b>	operation plan
<b>OPORD</b>	operation order
<b>TACON</b>	tactical control
<b>TF</b>	task force
<b>TST</b>	time-sensitive target

