

BOOK REVIEW | NONFICTION

# How David Became Goliath: The Secret of Israel's Military Success

By ROSA BROOKS FEB. 3, 2017

## **THE WEAPON WIZARDS**

### **How Israel Became a High-Tech Military Superpower**

By Yaakov Katz and Amir Bohbot

Illustrated. 288 pp. St. Martin's Press. \$27.99.

Seventy years ago, the state of Israel was still just a gleam in Zionists' eyes, and the future state's military was hardly more than a ragtag group of irregulars, forced to manufacture bullets in a secret facility built underneath a kibbutz. Today, Israel's military is widely viewed as one of the most effective in the world. Once compelled to arm itself with surplus equipment purchased from more powerful states (and sometimes obtained by stealth), Israel is now one of the world's six largest arms exporters, earning billions each year through the sale of military equipment to buyers from China and India to Colombia and Russia.

"The Weapon Wizards: How Israel Became a High-Tech Military Superpower" tells the story of this transformation. Written by the Israeli journalists Yaakov Katz and Amir Bohbot, "The Weapon Wizards" offers a lively account of Israel's evolving military prowess, from the early days of Jewish paramilitaries operating within the British Mandate to Israel's recent emergence as exporter of 60 percent of the world's

drones. From satellites and missile defense systems to adaptive armor and cyber weapons, Israel has consistently found ways to circumvent or leapfrog financial and technological barriers.

But Katz and Bohbot aspire to do more than just offer a journalistic history of the Israeli military's technological advances: They aim to explain just how the tiny Jewish state managed to become such a military innovator. "How did Israel do it?" Katz and Bohbot ask. "What was the secret to Israel's success?" Their answer: brains, pluck and the bracing prospect of imminent annihilation.

If "The Weapon Wizards" were a novel, it would be one written by Horatio Alger; if it were a biblical allegory, it would be the story of David and Goliath. Katz and Bohbot highlight several interconnected cultural drivers of Israel's military innovations. Surrounded by enemies at its inception, Israel came to view itself as a nation that could, as Arie Herzog, a former head of Israel's missile defense agency, put it, "either innovate or disappear." Meanwhile, "the Jewish tradition of education and scholarship" led Israel to place a high value on investments in research and development.

Today, Israel devotes a higher percentage of its G.D.P. to research and development than any other country, and Katz and Bohbot note that roughly 30 percent of Israeli R&D goes toward military technologies. Israel also invests in its human resources, with numerous specialized educational programs designed to bring top talent into the military and to send soldiers back to school. (Katz and Bohbot quote Shimon Peres: "We need to invest in soldiers' brains, not just their muscles.")

Israel's small size, combined with its tradition of universal military service, also helps, by ensuring that there's rarely more than one degree of separation between military officials, scientists and entrepreneurs; as a result, military needs and challenges are quickly and easily communicated to policy makers, academics and financiers.

Finally, Kahn and Bohbot argue, Israel's culture of informality offers an underappreciated advantage: "What makes Israel unique is the complete lack of structure." The absence of "social hierarchy . . . helps spur innovation." In Israel,

junior soldiers feel free to argue with high-ranking officers, and “a keen sense of chutzpah” encourages creativity and protects against groupthink.

“The Weapon Wizards” offers plenty of good stories about fascinating people. There’s the young Shimon Peres, negotiating weapons deals in Havana nightclubs. There’s Danny Shapira, the legendary Israeli pilot testing French Mirages. There’s the Israeli official who helps start Israel’s drone program in the late 1960s by buying remote-control airplanes at a Manhattan toy store and sending them back to Israel in the embassy’s diplomatic pouch.

What “The Weapon Wizards” doesn’t offer is any meditation on the political context or implications of Israel’s rise to military superpower status. Katz and Bohbot are cheerleaders, not critics, and there’s little room for introspection in this breathless tale of triumph over adversity. Left largely unmentioned, for instance, is the role of the United States. American security guarantees over the last few decades have kept Israel’s neighbors relatively docile, if not precisely friendly, and nearly a quarter of Israel’s annual defense budget is effectively paid for by the United States. Israel receives more American military aid than every other country in the world combined. A more complete answer to “How did Israel do it?” might be: pluck, brains and billions of dollars of American aid each year.

“The Weapon Wizards” is also largely silent on how Israel uses its military might. Absent is any reflection on the role of the Israeli armed forces in paving the way for the contentious expansion of Jewish settlements into Palestinian territory, for instance, or the Israeli practice of destroying homes occupied by the families of suspected militants, though both have been condemned by the international community.

Katz and Bohbot are similarly uninterested in the brave new world Israel is helping to create. Israel, they note with pride, has “become the first country to master the art of targeted killings,” which have now become “the global standard in the war on terror.” Some might consider this a dubious honor. To Katz and Bohbot, however, targeted killings are interesting only because they showcase the combination of “cutting-edge technology, high quality intelligence, and Israel’s best and brightest minds.”

Israel, Katz and Bohbot note, is “changing the way wars are being fought around the globe.” Readers will have to decide for themselves if this is something to cheer or mourn.

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