

# The Hawk vs. Dove debate

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Should the defense budget be cut? Can it be cut? And if so, by how much?



Photo by: LOCKHEED MARTIN / REUTERS

How much defense spending is enough? Can a bulging defense budget weaken a nation and its economy rather than strengthen it? Has the defense establishment adapted fully to the rapid changes occurring in the Arab world and elsewhere? As a new government takes shape, it must quickly construct a budget for 2013-14. Tax increases and spending cuts, totaling some 40 billion shekels (\$10.9 billion) or more, are needed to slash the growing budget deficit. A perennial ongoing debate focuses on the NIS 66.8 billion (\$18.2 billion) defense budget, fully a quarter of total government spending.

Should it be cut? Can it be cut? And if so, by how much? It is interesting that the same debate is now underway in the United States, where sequestration (legally mandated spending cuts) has slashed \$85 billion from government spending, including deep defense budget cuts.

The following is an outline of the key issues, presented as a hawk vs. dove debate.

Politicians are annoyed with two-handed economists, who argue both sides of an issue; but this issue is far from clear cut. How our leaders deal with it could be fateful.

Hawk: It would be irresponsible to cut defense spending in the upcoming budget.

The people of Israel have many needs – education, welfare, infrastructure. But there is a set of priorities, and survival comes first.

How can you risk the nation's survival? Dove: You hawks are perpetual scaremongers. You play the imminent-threat card whenever a defense cut is proposed.

Frankly, I'm fed up. In 2011, the Bank of Israel compared the defense budget approved by the government and Knesset at the start of the fiscal year and actual defense spending at the end of the year. Guess what? No correlation.

For the past eight years, billions more than were initially approved were spent. How? During the year, some

crisis or other was used to secure approval for added spending.

It's always the same silly script. After a huge political battle, billions of shekels are shifted in the budget from defense to civilian ministries. Then, by the end of the year, all the defense cuts are replaced – and then some.

The latest example? Iran. By some accounts, up to an additional 11 billion shekels was allocated to confront the Iranian nuclear threat, even though it is clear that the Americans will have to deal with it, not just Israel. According to outgoing Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz, "Prior to last year, the finance minister, relevant Knesset leaders and even the prime minister didn't have a clue about how much money was spent [on defense]... because we had no access to [the Defense Ministry's] books." Today, the Finance Ministry does have direct computer connections to the Defense Ministry, but it still does not have full control.

Hawk: Israel is not Switzerland.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Iran spent \$12-13 billion on defense in 2006-7 (latest data available), roughly what Israel spends.

And that's just Iran. Saudi Arabia spent \$48.5 billion (!) on defense in 2011, three times more than Israel. You doves say, Saudi hardware is meant to defend against Iran, not Israel. But can you say for sure that all those Saudi jets will never be used against Israel? Do you know the distance between Riyadh and Tel Aviv is only 900 miles, or two hours' flight time? Dove: Saudi Arabia has super-deep pockets; Israel doesn't. We can't afford all that expensive American hardware, just because some generals think we might need it. Take those F-35 jets we are buying from the United States. Our request for 75 F-35s will cost \$15 billion, or \$200 million per plane. And that price tag may yet rise.

In 1949, the frontline US F-86 jet fighter cost \$343,839 per plane, or \$3.5 million in today's terms. The F-35 costs 70 times more! Besides, a simulation showed that the latest Russian Sukhoi could defeat the F-35 in air combat. We are getting Edsel performance at Rolls Royce prices.

Hawk: You ignore the fact that Israel gets \$3 billion in military aid from America yearly, so America is paying for most of those planes. Besides, are you willing to let our pilots fly aging F-16s, against Saudi F-35s? Would you send your son to battle in an aircraft that is obsolete? SIPRI says Israel's defense spending as a proportion of GDP has fallen by half, from 15 percent in 1988 to only about 8 percent today. I call that a deep cut! Dove: The Arab world has totally changed in the past two years. I see no sign the defense establishment has recognized this change. Syria's conventional army is no longer a threat. That alone should enable us to slash our defense spending. Egypt will be preoccupied with rebuilding its economy for many years.

Moreover, the nature of modern war has changed. Take the excellent book by Gen.

(res.) Yedidia Groll-Yaari and Haim Assa, "Diffused Warfare: The Concept of Virtual Mass" (Haifa University, 2007). Yaari knows what he is talking about. He served with distinction in the naval commandos, commanded the Israel Navy and is now CEO of Rafael (Weapons Development Authority).

Yaari and Assa claim that classic military doctrines built around tanks and infantry no longer hold. In the age of asymmetric conflicts against guerrilla and terror forces, holding territory is no longer desirable. Yaari says the military should organize around air and small special force units that move rapidly in and out of target areas. The Israel Defense Forces' pinpoint attacks in Gaza, and earlier in Lebanon, prove this concept.

Hawk: It is not either/or, but both/and. If we have to invade Gaza to deal with Hamas, or southern Lebanon to deal with Hezbollah, Israel will need modern Merkava tanks and armored infantry. Of course we need to expand our special forces. They will need drones, communications, computers – and very long and expensive training. And we will also need tanks and infantry. Once again, dove, would you send your son into Gaza or Lebanon in an aging Patton tank? Dove: Even the hawks are doves. Former chief of staff Moshe Ya'alon, a leading candidate for the post of defense minister, says we can cut defense spending. And Kadima leader Shaul Mofaz, also a former chief of staff and defense minister, actually did cut military spending in favor of higher spending on education. Who knows better than they do about how to maintain a strong modern army while still limiting spending? Hawk: The way to determine defense spending is to create probable future scenarios and then decide how best to prepare for them. Here is one of those scenarios: Islamic governments in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, and possibly Jordan, join forces to arm jihadists and send them against Israel. Is that improbable? Read the scenario proposed by Sarah Johnstone and Jeffrey Mazo, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (quoted in Tom Friedman's New York Times column).

"Fledgling [Arab] democracies find it harder to deal with the root problems than the regimes they replaced and

become vulnerable to further unrest.” Is it not wise to prepare for this likely occurrence? Dove: More defense spending will weaken Israel, not strengthen it. Want proof? I once visited the American aircraft carrier, the USS Theodore Roosevelt. It has incredible state-of-the-art technology, including computer screens that show every ship in the world, its location, tonnage, registry and so on. Do you know how much that costs? America’s economy is buried below the decks of its aircraft carriers. That’s where it invests its expensive technology, while China and Europe put resources into their civilian economies. Take the new US aircraft carrier, the “Gerald Ford.” It will cost a staggering \$26 billion, half for the ship itself, and half for the 4,500 sailors manning it.

Can America really afford it? Can Israel afford all its expensive weapons? The cost of defense technology is going through the roof.

Was Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden killed by an aircraft carrier or by a handful of bold young men? America increased its military spending by 80 percent between 2000 and 2011. Many of its deficit problems stem from that.

Hawk: On Yom Kippur, October 6, 1973, I was called up to my artillery unit. I went off to war armed with an obsolete World War II Czech Mauser rifle. Is that what you want? Do you want to send young men to war without ceramic vests? If you believe in the American slogan of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” note that life and liberty (and protecting them) come before the pursuit of happiness in shopping malls.

Israel cannot take for granted the life and liberty of its citizens.

Dove: Let’s give the last word to an apparent hawk, US Gen. Dwight D.

Eisenhower. Just after Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin died, on March 5, 1953, President Eisenhower said, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.”

When even the generals say cut defense spending, Israel and its government must listen and act. Let’s stop wasting the hopes of our children on the imagined fears of our hawks.

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