

Budget cuts 'will harm IDF's ability to purchase weapons'

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Yaakov Lappin , THE JERUSALEM POST

The cuts to the defense budget proposed by Finance Minister Ronnie Bar-On will hamper the IDF's ability to plan for new weapons systems acquisitions in the coming years, Yehuda Ben-Meir, a senior national security researcher, warned on Tuesday.

Bar-On called a press conference at the Finance Ministry on Tuesday morning, in which he said the government had to choose between making cuts to social welfare budgets or to spending on defense.

"This is a very difficult decision," Bar-On said during the conference. "My personal opinion is... that we need to opt for social welfare spending and aim to balance security and social welfare needs."

One option presented by Bar-On is to trim NIS 2.5 billion from the 2009 defense budget. A second is to cut NIS 1.3b. from defense, while the remainder of the cash, NIS 1.2 billion, would be invested in social welfare programs.

But the dilemma being presented by Bar-On is "manufactured," Meir said. He blamed government mishandling and lack of planning for the present predicament.

"The whole idea of defense budget cuts is wrong. This issue arises every year, but for no good reason," Meir said. "The military has received a set percentage of the national budget, which has already been agreed upon. The problem is that every year, the government and Knesset make new decisions, mostly in the form of private member's bills, which require state financing, therefore cutting into the set budgets. Such bills should be put on hold if the government will see that budgets will be harmed by them," he added.

"This will not threaten the existence of the State of Israel - Israel's security does not hinge on NIS 2.5b. But it will harm efforts to secure a strong army and to plan ahead. Training will be cut back. Weapons systems we planned to purchase in a year will be out of reach. The army is an organization which operates on five-year plans, and these cuts wreck the plans," Meir said.

"Just recently, the government approved the IDF's multi-annual plan. Now they are cutting it by NIS 2.5b., which is surreal," he added.

"Private legislation is running wild. The government must learn to say that it cannot afford this legislation, and that the bills need to wait for when money becomes available," Meir

said. "The proposed budget cuts are not being made because the security situation has improved. The cuts are not based on any good reason."

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