



ISRAELIS DEBATE NEW DEFENSE BUDGET

More than half of Israelis believe the country puts too much money into defense, meanwhile external threats to Israel loom large.

A new survey shows that 60 percent of Israelis feel the country should cut its defense budget.

Thirty-two percent of Israelis think the defense budget is much higher than it should be, 28 percent believe it is only slightly higher, and just 15 percent say it is lower than it should be, according to a survey conducted by the Israeli business daily The Marker and commissioned by Israel's Ministry of Finance.

The survey was published on the same day the Israeli government debated the Finance Ministry's proposal to cut the country's defense budget by \$776 million for the budgetary years of 2011 and 2012.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu touched on the debate in his remarks at the beginning of Thursday's cabinet meeting.

"We also have needs such as – inter alia – education and social needs. We also know that we are in a threatening environment and must respond accordingly," he said.

"We tried to achieve a comprehensive solution by the new fiscal rule, which leads to a certain restraint that is, to a certain degree, less than what is customary in other advanced economies," Netanyahu added.

The defense budget is a sensitive question in Israel since, in the country's short history, it has seen numerous wars and terror attacks. The exact amount of the defense budget is also hotly debated, as the Finance Ministry calculates it in one way and the Defense Ministry in another way.

Efraim Inbar, professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and director of the university's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies told The Media Line that Israel should spend more, not less on defense.

"I'm in favor of allocating more money to defense. We are a rich country who can afford to pay more," Inbar told The Media Line. He qualified that when assessing the actual amount of the budget: "This is mystical, it's very hard to give an authoritarian judgment on it."

"There is no conclusive evidence whatsoever that the defense is more wasteful than any other bureaucracy. There is always waste," Inbar responded, when asked about those who say the budget is already too high.

"I prefer we spend more as we are dealing with life and death," he said.

Dr. Dan Schueftan, the deputy director of the National Security Studies Center at the University of Haifa, told The Media Line that now is not the right time to cut the budget.

"What we have tremendous defense needs for we are short on defense spending in a very, very serious way," he said. "This was always the situation, but now we are confronted with Iran developing nuclear weapons and supporting major challenges close to Israel [such as] Hizbullah and Hamas."

"No one in the Treasury Ministry underestimates the defense establishment's needs," he added.

"The question is always how do you maintain a strong defense without undercutting the need of the society at large?" Schueftan said.

Schueftan pointed out that when Israel made cuts to the defense budget in the 1980s that improved the country's economy it was done after the peace agreement with Egypt signed in 1979, and during the Iran-Iraq war. These were times when the threat to Israel was low, unlike today.

Regarding the possible outcome of the current debate, he predicted a compromise would be reached between the two sides.

"A compromise is the most likely outcome. If we are talking about 3 billion, then it will be 2 to the Defense Ministry and 1 to the Treasury," he said.

"Remember that [Prime Minister Binyamin] Netanyahu depends completely on [Defense Minister Ehud] Barak and Barak is arguing for a larger defense budget so the compromise will probably be closer to Barak than to [Finance Minister Yuval] Steinitz," Schueftan said, referring to the current makeup of parliament, where the Labor party headed by Defense Minister Ehud Barak is a vital coalition partner.

Meir Elran, senior research fellow and director of the homeland security program and co-director of the Israeli society and national security program at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, also pointed to the political implications behind the debate.

Elran told The Media Line that the results of the survey would not affect the government's decision on the defense budget.

"It will not depend on the will of the public, but by political consideration with the defense minister versus the other ministers," he said. "The survey has been ordered by the Finance Ministry and it enforces their argument in the present with the Defense Ministry on the budget."

Elran also pointed out that when a government ministry commissions a survey, the results are expected support its opinion. Had the question been asked differently, such as should the army be given all the resources necessary to fight terror or the Iranian threat, then the answer would have been completely different.

By Adam Gonn on Thursday, July 15, 2010