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Israel needs a political chief of staff

In an era when most wars are fought against non-state actors, it is important that chief of staff have an thorough understanding of politics.

By Shlomo Brom

Amid the uproar over the selection of the new Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, some have claim the chief of staff must not be political. These purists say a major general who served as a prime military secretary is disqualified from serving as chief of staff, because he has been infected with that despicable illness called politics, which is at least as serious as syphilis.

The appointment of a chief of staff at a time when Israel is confronting complex security threats demands more serious treatment. And we would do well to reevaluate the accepted wisdom that the chief of staff must be a purely military man, devoid of any political acumen - in short, a blockhead.

When it comes to foreign policy, there is nothing worse than a chief of staff who does not understand the diplomatic environment in which Israel operates. And there is no bigger threat to democracy than a chief of staff who, instead of following his government's policy, operates strictly on the basis of narrow military considerations.

It has always been true, and is even more so in the 21st century, that the most common type of war is not fought in the field of combat, but in the fields of diplomacy and public relations. These are wars in which the actions of a single soldier at a checkpoint or aboard the Mavi Marmara can have far-reaching political ramifications.

Under such circumstances, the ideal military leader is an intellectual - an officer with the necessary military knowledge, but who also thoroughly understands the political and strategic environment in which he operates. It is an officer who knows when to stop, and not only when to rush forward, as his job includes creating a security environment that helps the government implement its policies. If he is at odds with these policies, his only option is to resign.

That is why the arguments made during the period of the Oslo process against army officers being involved in negotiations with the Palestinians seemed pathetic to me. In the United States, no one gets excited about the fact that one of the assistants to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has the job of helping the secretary of state, accompanying him or her on trips overseas and being party to discussions with foreign governments.

The difference between Israel and the U.S. is that there, the military's subordination to the political leadership is clear, and no one thinks military considerations take priority over the president's policies. In the U.S., a general who was told by the prime minister to remove checkpoints and replied that he would do so but if something happens, it will be the prime minister's responsibility, would be fired.

A military leader must be familiar with the way government works, and he must also understand party politics even though he is not involved in party politics. Colin Powell was one of the best chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff precisely because of his background, which included a long stint at the National Security Council and because of his familiarity with the political system and American foreign policy. It is thus unsurprising that the first Gulf War was a stellar example of forethought producing a desirable outcome, while the second Gulf War was a classic case of "let's take over Iraq and then we'll figure out what to do with it."

What bothers me about Chief of Staff-designate Yoav Galant's background is that he may not be political enough. First, he never held a senior General Staff post that required him to interact with the political system. And second, both before the war in the Gaza Strip and during it, he played precisely the role of the blockhead officer who thinks the main thing is to "give it" to Hamas, without appreciating the strategic and political realities in which the war was being conducted.

I hope he was just pretending.

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