

The Changing Face of the IDF: The Security Agenda and the Ballot Box

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Introduction

The year 2006 marked the beginning of a process at the end of which the Israel Defense Forces is supposed to “shrink” by 20 percent! This is not just another cutback, but rather a fundamental change in the makeup, character, mentality, and structure of the military organization. Is this the right direction, or is this a gamble? Is this shrinking process sufficient in and of itself, or perhaps the reverse is true, and it has crossed all red lines? How does it suit the anticipated threats? The government ministries apparently do not have exhaustive answers to these questions, especially on the eve of elections, when the conflict between the social and security agendas is leading election propaganda for politicians.

The army does not volunteer for upheavals and cutbacks; it is coerced into them. As for the current agenda, the dramatic foreseeable changes are significant. They are not a matter of an exchange of views, persuasion by the political echelon, or a conclusion derived from an analysis of alternatives presented to the political level. The IDF leadership is perfectly attuned to the voices emanating from the political arena. It holds a realistic view of the growing trend in the political arena and is preparing to address it. According to this trend, the security budget will gradually and substantially decrease since the standard solutions applied to date – namely, cutbacks here and there – will no longer be sufficient. Moreover, in an election campaign where the minister of defense is busy highlighting his working class background and retired generals are not at the head of the “most sought after” list, there will not be too many advocates for the security budget as it currently stands.

This article focuses on presenting the key changes planned for the IDF, both in its personnel and in its ground forces. It begins by describing the chain of events that led to the IDF’s working plans dictating these changes. It will also outline some of the weaknesses of the method currently employed to determine the security budget and consider how the existing method can be improved.

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The Kelah Plan and its Alternatives

The starting point for the journey the army embarked on in 2006 lies in the collapse of the long-term working plan "Kelah," which was designated for the years 2003-2008. When the Kelah plan was launched, it was already a revolution in its own right since not only did it generate a change in thinking regarding the army's operation It also adjusted the IDF's internal proportions, for example, the ratio between the heavy, armored forces and the mobile, readily activated infantry. The size of the armored forces has been greatly reduced and for the first time in decades, the size of the IDF infantry exceeds that of the armored corps.

However, the Kelah plan lasted only two years. It expired before its time, not because of a change in perception or because of different threats, but rather because of changes in the budget. Kelah started off with 38.5 billion NIS and was shaved down to 34 billion NIS by 2005. When Dan Halutz assumed the position of chief of staff, he found that most of the budget at his disposal had already been allocated and that he had no leeway to adjust it to future needs. Accordingly, the plan was abandoned in favor of a new one.

The army is not equipped for radical changes and therefore during the course of 2006 it is supposed to maintain the status quo and prepare a new long-term working plan for 2007-2012. Already now, at its inception, this plan is showing signs of weakness. The prime minister committed to the defense establishment for a transition period of three years, during which the army would enjoy a fixed, regular budget of 34.25 billions NIS. A three-year transition period would enable the army to contract business relationships with various entities, draft plans, and make changes without repeatedly causing shockwaves. However, the defense establishment is not convinced that the post-elections government will be capable of honoring this commitment. The military echelon's political antenna is most adept at discerning the music emanating from the political arena prior to the elections. From the point of view of the military elite, "a change of priorities in society" is a well-know code phrase that has only one meaning: another cutback in the security budgets in favor of social welfare, education, and health.

Some time ago, after the government determined the year's allocation for defense and after the minister of defense agreed to forego a chunk of the budget in favor of the education budget, the chief of staff said to the prime minister something along the lines of "I understand that this is the budget you decided upon. Now tell me

what my real budget is" – whereupon the two "settled the matter." That is how the issue was handled, but those days appear to have passed and are unlikely to make a repeat appearance.

In December 2005 the prime minister toured the Israel-Egypt border and acquired an inside view of the arms and drug smuggling problem as well as the terrorist activity along this loose border. Outraged by what he saw, Sharon emphatically instructed the security forces to seal the border. This directive translated into half a billion shekels per year for three years, to build a protective fence, plant electronic sensors, and set up a patrol force. The prime minister knew in advance that this was the required sum. The "Hourglass" plan, which addressed the problem of the Egyptian border and was prepared by Deputy Chief of Staff Major General Moshe Kaplinsky, was presented to him prior to the tour. However, one week after the tour, when the minister of defense and the chief of staff reported to the prime minister to finalize the border issue and the special allocation, the prime minister made it clear to them that a supplement of half a billion shekels to the security budget was out of the question. Is this also the fate of the army's fixed budget that the prime minister committed to for the three-year transition period?

Projected Personnel Changes

A substantial cutback in army personnel is imminent. The Personnel Directorate at the General Staff is currently talking about reducing mandatory service for soldiers in administrative positions to two years, which applies to almost 20 percent of the soldiers in mandatory service. Two thirds of them serve on the large bases on the home front, some of them in nonessential positions. In Tel Aviv's "Kirya" alone, there are one thousand soldiers in "superfluous" positions, a figure universally accepted across the military spectrum.

The magic word pertaining to shortening military service for men is differentiation, an expression imposed by reality rather than ideology. In other words, the home front command is trimmed down in order to preserve the scope of the indispensable combat force. This differentiation clashes with the Defense Service Law, which requires mandatory service of equal duration for all. Therefore, putting this idea into practice will require appropriate legislation.

At the same time, the committee headed by Prof. Avi Ben-Bassat, which was appointed by the minister of defense to investigate the issue of shortening the mandatory military service, is currently finalizing its recommendations. The main recommendation is to shorten mandatory service for all men by four months. The resulting anticipated savings in direct expenses for conscript soldiers is almost 700 million NIS a year. This is in addition to over 100 million NIS in savings on demobilization grants for soldiers, since the grant is awarded according to the number of months of service.

The army is very troubled by this projected recommendation since it substantially diminishes the size of the combat force. Thus, shortening the mandatory service would mean reducing the number of field units by a considerable number of brigades. Even under current circumstances, only 20 percent of men in the regular service serve in the combat force.

The army reserve law, which is currently under debate in the Knesset committees, is supposed to defer reserve mobilization for operational deployment (e.g., guarding settlements). Yet the reserve force is also intended to compensate for the decrease in the regular combat force, and furthermore the IDF began to implement the army reserve law before it passed its second and third reading in the Knesset. As a result, as of 2006 the number of reservists called up for service will be reduced by another few thousand every year. Accordingly, at times of confrontation, such as the intifada, or during routine security measures along the security fence and the borders, the decrease in the volume of combat units is liable to be crucial.

The army plans to compensate – at least in part – for the shortage of combat support soldiers and administrative staff who will be serving an abridged term of service by making better use of the women's force. Currently, over 30 percent of recruitment-age girls are released on religious grounds. This statistic is overly high and the IDF intends to target this phenomenon. Effective guidance for female recruits likewise means encouraging women to assume traditionally male positions, such as field intelligence officers. Clearly, budgetary constraints also lead to ideological-social changes.

The IDF will investigate the possibility of not shortening combat soldiers' military service, namely they would continue to serve for thirty-six months. In that case, the army would recommend differentiation: the service of those not defined as combat soldiers, but rather as combat supporters or those with vocational positions,

will be shortened by eight months. Soldiers with administrative positions will serve for two years only. The funds made available as a result of the reduced demobilization grants will be used to compensate combat soldiers and soldiers in essential positions serving a three-year military service. One of the proposals is to pay combat soldiers a salary of 4,000 NIS at least for the last four months of their service and give them preferential educational and employment benefits upon their discharge.

One way or another, regardless of the final outcome, the ethos of egalitarian service will be shattered since a new model of mandatory service will be created – a shorter and differential service. The army understands that when it comes to the new model in the making, motivation and values are not enough. For a young person in a field unit to serve for longer and to be called up for reserve duty over a period of twenty years following his regular army service, he must be offered financial compensation. The IDF's personnel directorate proposes not only a salary, but also provides combat soldiers with the opportunity to obtain their BA at the state's expense, along with other benefits.

The abridged service will obviously lead to changes within the armed forces, such as shorter training periods and shorter courses. Already in the past year, the air force shortened its training courses – with the exception of the pilots course – by 25 percent with no dire consequences. An internal military committee is currently looking into the option to change the career model for junior officers. Among other changes, the aim is to extend the career service cadet's commitment from one year to two, and indeed, there is sound reasoning to demand professional training and minimal age requirements before an officer earns command over a combat force. Committing to a regular service of two years also makes it possible to decrease substantially the number of cadets in officers schools.

Extending the career service for junior officers will to a certain extent compensate for the substantial reduction of the standing army as a whole. According to the expired Kelah plan, the army was supposed to have dismissed about 6,000 career army personnel and civil employees by 2008. To date, 4,500 persons have completed their service. It is already amply clear that in the new long-term working plan, the career army will have to discharge another few thousand persons, so that the size of the career army will be two thirds of its present size – just like it was in the mid-1990s.

Projected Changes in the Ground Forces

The last stage of the ground forces' reorganization, namely, establishing the entire force in its new configuration, begins in 2006. This mission entails merging commands, cutting back on personnel, and optimizing the ground forces' activity, which will make certain sacred cows vanish from the military landscape.

The journey to the ground forces' new structure began twenty-one years ago with the launching of the field corps command. For organizational and personal reasons and as a result of conservatism and partisan excuses of all sorts, this initial step never materialized into a full-fledged ground force. Similarly, the launching of the ground force's command in 1998 was no more than a small step forward. This year will witness the first major attempt at completing the process.

December 26, 2005 marked the beginning of this process, when the General Staff's Technological and Logistics Directorate transferred its operational units to the ground forces. The process of subordinating eight corps – including the signal corps, the ordnance corps, and the personnel management corps – to the ground forces will be completed during the course of the year. The idea is for all of the ground forces – maneuver, auxiliary, and support – along with their training bases to unite within a single operational body that would create a combat doctrine, as well as qualify and train personnel. Major General Meir Kalifi, who will be subordinate to GOC Northern Command, Major General Benny Gantz, will head this operational unit, to be called “the ground forces' corps, doctrine, and training division.”

In order to achieve greater efficiency, some of the corps will be abolished. For example, the option to subordinate the engineering corps to the armored corps is under investigation. The option to combine officers courses and create a collective officers course is also being investigated, such as in the case of the field intelligence and artillery corps, which have a lot in common, as well as in the field of tactical intelligence collection. This will actually enable some of the corps to grow stronger. The chief paratroopers and infantry officer will assume responsibility for all of the infantry brigades' basic training bases. Moreover, the chief paratroopers and infantry officer will head the ground force to be called “the special forces cluster,” which will comprise units such as Duvdevan, Maglan, Oketz, Egoz, and Lotar. A single school - “the special forces school,” offering a joint training and weapons program - will serve these units. This special force will be activated primarily deep into enemy territory to combat terrorism.

The regular brigades' patrol battalions will also attend the special forces school. The selection process will be uniform. Volunteers will not have to undergo separate selection processes for six special units. The new setting will also oversee and impact on the advancement of officers in all of the ground force units, from the moment they join the officers school, throughout their training in the tactical command college, company commanders and regiment commanders courses, in-service training for brigade commanders, and all the way to the command and staff school. This process is part of an experiment that will be launched this year in a new division called the "multiple corps tactical division." This division cannot be defined as an armored brigade, an infantry brigade, or an artillery group, and the officer to head it could be an artilleryman, an armored corps soldier, or an infantryman.

Substantial changes in the General Staff are also necessary in order for the ground forces command to be capable of functioning as a true ground force unit. Chief of Staff Dan Halutz has defined three principles underlying the reorganization plan. The first principle consists of separating the operating units from the staff units. The second principle states that building up the IDF force will only be accomplished from within the units. The third principle is to sever the General Staff from its role as supreme command of the ground forces. Indeed, the General Staff will shed responsibility for the ongoing management of the ground force army, part ways with most of its operational units, and become, for the first time in its history, a General Staff in the full sense of the word, overseeing all units.

The organizational change, with all its many other dimensions not described here, cannot stand alone. It is meant to serve as a foundation. The new organizational structure is intended to give rise to a different ground force army that is fundamentally distinct from the army we currently know and is better suited to the needs of society, better adjusted to the existing threats, and more in tune with technological developments.

This upheaval will not only affect personnel and the ground forces. Several dimensions that have yet to be reexamined will be discussed in depth during the course of 2006, for example, the navy's structure. What will the navy's size be and how will it be divided internally? Which vessels will be grounded? Can one make do with a navy whose core consists of a submarine force that will function as part of the IDF's long-term strategic force, alongside guard ships in charge of routine security measures along the coasts? Far reaching ideas are also brought up in other areas:

perhaps Israel need not produce tanks and how many tanks does it need? How many fighter planes does the state actually need in view of the threats it is facing? This is a partial list of the issues that will be reexamined and will provoke much tumult and power struggles.

Conclusion

Statesmen and politicians do not have the patience to wait for these processes to ripen in the army. One can assume that they will wish to benefit from the fruits of the cutback to the security budget and the shrinkage of the army as soon as possible. For example, the army would like the shortened term of service to apply to those who will enlist in 2006. The political echelon will press for an abridged term of service for those who have already been recruited and are expected to be discharged in 2007-2008.

It appears as though the clash between the social and security agendas is inevitable, especially during an election period. Therefore, the present time is an excellent opportunity to initiate a discussion of the security budget, which, as opposed to other government budgets, is a closed budget that is not available for public review or open to criticism. Those who truly wish to make fundamental social changes and transfer budgets from security to education, social welfare, and health must demand, first and foremost, that the security budget be submitted to a genuine external audit. The defense establishment and the army must provide explanations for each project they launch, and it is especially important to ascertain that an external entity not only asks questions regarding the proposed budget, but is also able to suggest alternatives.

The Ministry of Defense divides its annual budget as it sees fit. This budget also funds exotic projects that are estimated to cost billions. A portion of the funds is managed under a heavy veil of secrecy and for security reasons the state comptroller's report only makes vague allusions to failing projects and problematic deals. However, the state comptroller does not have the wherewithal to change the situation. Similarly, according to the current method, the defense establishment, with the help of the IDF, defines for itself which are the threats that Israel is facing as well as what is the appropriate response to these threats. Thus the defense establishment decides on the size of the force as well as the necessary reserves it requires in order to address these threats adequately.

Officially, the government considers and approves the proposals set forth by the defense establishment and the IDF. However, when the government discusses the security budget, it is not presented with any alternative to the army's position. Politicians' proposals for the army to trim its budget are not necessarily based on knowledge of the ins and outs of the security budget. Very few people are truly familiar with what happens with the security budget, 40 percent of which is not in the IDF's control. Accordingly, the cutback requests are usually channeled toward the well known, popular issues, such as salaries for army career personnel, since that is a topic that everyone is well versed in.

The IDF is at the onset of a major organizational rehaul that will be greeted with cries of despair – some of them demagogic – from all directions. The changing strategic environment, i.e., the decline of traditional threats and the rise of new ones, the political circumstances of clashing agendas and elections, and the necessity to exhibit openness and transparency with regard to the security budget open a window of opportunity that requires an in-depth and thorough discussion of the question of how the defense establishment is budgeted. This analysis must precede any discussion of where the army is actually heading.