September 6, 2012 Thursday 19 Elul 5772

THE JERUSALEM POST
JPOST.com
Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website

Security cabinet remains key in deciding on war

By HERB KEINON

06/09/2012

Senior fellow at INSS says decision on Iran needs approval of the whole government.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu adjourned a meeting of the security cabinet on Wednesday over media leaks in a moment of anger. That is his prerogative.

What he can't do, however, is disband the body entirely since this is the forum, ultimately, where a decision to

attack Iran – if it ever comes to that – would be taken.

There has been a great deal of misinformation over the past few months about the question of who in this country will decide whether to attack Iran. A few weeks ago there was an impression created in the media that Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak would make the decision alone.

There have also been reports that the decision would be taken by the “octet” – Netanyahu’s informal body of senior ministers – which was expanded to nine people with the addition of Home Front Defense Minister Avi Dichter.

An example of this confusion already appeared in March on The Daily Beast website, which ran an article headlined: “Meet the Israeli ‘Octet’ That Would Decide an Iran Attack.”

Wrong, said Yehuda Ben- Meir, a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv who has written two books on how national security decisions are made in Israel.

“A decision on Iran cannot be done without a decision by the entire government,” he said, adding, “In constitutional matters, common practice has a great deal of relevance.”

And the common practice, Ben-Meir said, is that launching wars and major military operations needs the approval of the whole government.

He cited the precedent of the rescue raid on Entebbe in 1976, when then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin brought the issue to the full cabinet.

“When I asked Rabin about it later,” said Ben-Meir, who served as deputy foreign minister from 1981 to 1984,

“he said it was clear that an operation of such a magnitude needed the entire government’s approval. Secondly he said that if the operation failed, he would have had to resign, and if he needed to resign and bring down the government, this needed to be a decision taken by all the ministers.”

Likewise, Ben-Meir said, then-prime minister Menachem Begin brought the decision to attack the nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981 to the full cabinet as well.

But this is where things get a bit tricky.

Begin brought the issue to the cabinet for a vote after the planes had already taken off – but still with enough time to recall them. He, too, felt the need to get the full government’s approval.

Ben-Meir said that since a decision to attack Iran would be so fateful, it was likely this pattern would be followed today and the final decision would be voted on by the full 29-member cabinet. But the in-depth discussion on the matter, as well as a prior vote, would take place in the 14- member security cabinet.

It was also evident, he said, that following a discussion in the security cabinet and a vote there, that the full cabinet vote would be nothing more than a formality.

The security cabinet, known officially as the Minister’s Committee on Security Affairs, is a statutory body empowered by the government to make decisions on security and diplomatic issues.

The law stipulates that in addition to the prime minister, the following five ministers must be members of this forum: the holders of the defense, foreign, finance, justice and public security portfolios.

Other ministers can be members of the security cabinet as long as the membership of this body does not

exceed half that of the regular cabinet, which is why today there are 14 members in the security cabinet, out of a 29-member cabinet. Four other ministers currently have non-voting observer status.

Among the issues this body is authorized to deal with are national security issues, national security policy and objectives, foreign policy and military and security operations.

The law, Ben-Meir said, basically entrusted the security cabinet with making decisions in the name of the government on security issues. Those decisions, on a regular basis, do not have to come to the full cabinet for a vote. On the matter of major military operations, he repeated, the norm in this country is to bring the decisions to the full cabinet.

Netanyahu and his spokesmen have been careful over the past few weeks not to spell out how or in what forum a decision to attack Iran would be made, beyond saying the prime minister would follow the common process in the country.

While members of the security cabinet are there either by virtue of the law or because the full cabinet appointed them, the same is not true of what has been called the inner cabinet, or the seven, eight or nine ministers Netanyahu regularly calls upon for consultations.

This body is a completely advisory body, and its members are there upon Netanyahu’s discretion.

Indeed, the newest member – Dichter – is not even a member of the security cabinet.

While influential, this is not the forum that will decide on an attack on Iran. The heavy lifting on that decision – the indepth discussion and a vote – will be made in the security cabinet, and that decision will likely be brought at the last minute to the full cabinet for a pro forma endorsement.

Netanyahu adjourned the security cabinet meeting on Wednesday because of anger over leaks. He did not disband the forum – that power he does not have.

http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=284016