

## ***Does the National Security Council Have a Chance in the Israeli Political-Security Reality?***

---

Giora Eiland, Efraim Halevy, and David Ivry

### **Giora Eiland:**

In discussing the National Security Council, what is often said in politics also holds true here: the question is not whether it is good or bad or what it does; the question is how the prime minister wants to conduct matters of state. In fact, that starting point determines everything else. Without delving into political or cultural constraints, it can be said of at least the last four Israeli prime ministers that they preferred to skip the stage of the staff preparatory work. This may be due to their belief that they already knew what was necessary; or because of political reasons, since it is impossible to share ideas with potential political rivals, and both the foreign minister and the defense minister are often political rivals; or because of concerns about leaks; or other reasons. Usually, the result lacks a component that Ehud Barak used to describe with the following Jewish saying: “The outcome depends on the premeditation.” In other words, in order to succeed, one must plan ahead. Unfortunately, one often sees that this is not exactly how things happen.

For example, Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip, some two years ago, was, militarily speaking, a reasonably successful operation, certainly in comparison with the Second Lebanon War. Perhaps the circumstances were also somewhat easier for the IDF. Still, astoundingly, four days *after* – not before! – the start of the operation, there was a central argument about the most important question: What was the objective of the operation? The government was divided into three groups. The first took the approach of a limited objective of achieving deterrence, to deliver a blow to Hamas that

would make it understand that aggression is not worth its while. The second group believed that deterrence was not sufficient, because Hamas could later adjust its calculations and decide to shoot, and therefore the objective must be to damage Hamas' military and arms smuggling capabilities. Finally, the third group, which included Haim Ramon, believed that the objective must be wider still, and political, i.e., to topple the Hamas government.

The military implications of each of the three objectives are highly significant and differ widely from goal to goal. If the objective is only to achieve deterrence, it can be achieved by a very powerful, concentrated, aerial attack alone. If the objective is to damage the military and arms smuggling capabilities, it is necessary to conquer or at least to occupy large areas with ground forces, actually attack Hamas operatives in their tunnels and depots, destroy their rockets, and take control of the Philadelphi strip in order to prevent smuggling. If the objective is to topple the Hamas government, then apparently it is necessary to conquer the entire Gaza Strip, including the city of Gaza, and control the entire length of it over an extended period of time in order to generate a political change, similar to the American strategic objectives in Iraq.

The argument is a legitimate one. What is not acceptable is starting it four days into the operation instead of long before its beginning. The problem is not necessarily with the staff, but, rather to what extent – if at all – policymakers have the patience and will to demand such a discussion before the military decision is made and before military plans are presented. When the prime minister does not want to hold that kind of discussion or does not deem it necessary, it is very hard to create successful staff work.

However, if the prime minister genuinely wants proper implementation of decision-making processes in matters of importance to national security, then he must do something relatively simple. Out of the seven million citizens of the State of Israel, the prime minister must select one individual whom he trusts and also feels comfortable with on a personal level, or even on a political level. This person also should enjoy the prime minister's faith in his capabilities and experience in the relevant fields. The prime minister should make it possible for the person to assemble a staff of a maximum of 20 people, with only four functions. If the staff is able to fulfill these four functions properly, there will be a significant improvement, unrelated to the larger questions of political structures and so on.

First, this staff sets the agenda for regular (possibly weekly) meetings of the Cabinet, the Forum of Seven, or whatever forum is defined. Clearly, in the higher echelons, the main question is not what decisions are made but what is brought for discussion. Second, when deciding on the topic or when there is a topic at hand, the staff must do the preparatory work and come to the discussion with a clearly understood argument. In my experience in various military capacities as head of the Operations Directorate and head of the Planning Directorate, I would often come to Cabinet meetings and ask myself: What is the subject? Who is involved? Why? What has to be decided? What is the purpose of this discussion? It was never clear. Naturally, the discussion reflected this. Therefore, preparation for these discussions must be at the level of checking facts and data before those at the meeting simply toss around numbers. Third, the staff leader should conduct the discussion. This means that if the topic is not just an intelligence report or a situation survey but an issue requiring decision on a course of action (for example, the case of Operation Cast Lead), then it is necessary to present, in an objective fashion, the three or four relevant alternatives. Someone has to moderate this discussion and present the material in a coherent, organized fashion to cover the widest possible spectrum, rather than begin right away with, “So, what are you proposing to do?” Fourth, after the decision is made, it is necessary to assign someone the responsibility of ensuring that the decision is implemented and that the derivative decisions are also made and carried out. The prime minister will often end the discussion by saying, “So it’s necessary to do a, b, and c.” The staff leader must translate this into military terms of forces and missions – who does what and how and when – and must also maintain supervision and control.

All of this is not so complicated, and anyone who has worked in staff positions in the army knows that an army staff has a clear definition in terms of its function and knows how to do this in a fairly straightforward way. All that is required is for the prime minister to recognize the need for this. As long as that recognition is lacking, nothing can really be achieved.

### **Efraim Halevy:**

I was appointed head of the National Security Council by Ariel Sharon around the time that he also established the Ministerial Committee on Non-Jewish Citizens in the State of Israel, to focus on questions related

to Israeli Arabs. Then, Prime Minister Sharon decided that the staff of this committee would be the National Security Council, and he gave me the responsibility for preparing the first discussion. Before presenting the committee's recommendations, I consulted with Mr. Sharon: "Mr. Prime Minister," I said, "there are four possible ways of approaching this topic. Are we relating to the Arab minority in Israel as a national minority? Are we relating to the Arab minority in Israel as a religious minority? Are we relating to the Arab minority in Israel as a cultural minority? Or are we relating to the Arab minority in Israel as individuals? Because each one of the alternatives has implications, and I want to hear from you whether you have a particular vision for your strategy as prime minister." Prime Minister Sharon listened to me attentively, as always, and then he smiled broadly and said: "Efraim, my friend: I want you to make a recommendation to me about building a soccer field in Sakhnin. That's what I'm asking you to do. All the rest – leave it to me."

A second story is about Yitzhak Shamir when he was prime minister. At the time, I was deputy head of the Mossad. We were concerned about Syria's intentions and whether then-President Hafez Asad wanted peace with Israel. Then-head of military intelligence Uri Saguy made vehement claims that Asad wanted some type of peace treaty with Israel. Uri Saguy and I went to see Prime Minister Shamir and we explained, "Mr. Prime Minister, we would like to sit down and examine this whole matter in a serious way." Prime Minister Shamir answered, "I'd like you not to do that. You need to concentrate on one question only: Are there signs indicative of war? That's your job. Signs indicative of peace – that concerns only me. Why? Because I know what price I have to pay for peace. That's my decision, whether I want to pay the price or not. That's a political decision, not a decision about whether we want negotiations with Asad, but rather if I want peace at such-and-such a price. That's none of your business. It's not even the business of political planning. It's a matter of a strategic decision of the leadership, of the Cabinet." And he was right.

I relate these stories because there is an incorrect approach, focusing too heavily on the idea of intellectualized decision making. As with much else, there is theory, and there is reality. There is learning, and there is action. There are wise people, and there are workers. In this instance, the National

Security Council represents the workers. In the world of workers, reality is different.

With the situation in Egypt, for example, one can always ask why the national security policy staff failed to foresee events. This, however, is an impossible mission. A suggested alternative, presenting various possibilities, is often not satisfactory because policymakers are not always helped by seeing only a list of possibilities. The national security staff is then in the position of determining which possibilities are more likely and which less likely of being realized. This relies on particular definitions of “high probability” and “low probability” that themselves are difficult to set. For that reason, the exercise is often not valuable to policymakers.

A better alternative is to focus not on a forecasting role but on an advisory role and on the choice of the particular advisor. In the United States, for example, the most successful advisors have been those whose outlooks were close to those of the president of the same period. Henry Kissinger, close to President Nixon and with a similar worldview, steered policy on the basis of his own understanding, with or without a particular document. When Kissinger was National Security Advisor he steered policy on China as well as the détente policy with the Soviet Union. This was not the result of staff work but was based on his worldview.

Therefore, in the final analysis, this is not a matter of science or political science but of the personal relationship between the prime minister and his advisor. If his advisor has the same approach as he – and I stress the word “same” – the advisor can tell him, “Mr. Prime Minister, what you’re thinking here is wrong; I think we’re about to make a mistake.” “We” – not “you.” “We” are about to make a mistake, because you and I are the same in this matter. A national security advisor can have an impact when he or she has this type of relationship with the prime minister, especially if that relationship is grounded in worldly wisdom and public experience and the ability to perceive the connections between different issues.

In conclusion, the role of the national security advisor is not to make political decisions, as demonstrated by the stories of Ariel Sharon and Yitzhak Shamir. It is also not necessarily to forecast, as indicated by the difficulties inherent in such a role. Rather, the role is to be a comrade of the prime minister, a source of advice that the prime minister can trust, whose

advice is not grounded in scientific predictions but in real-world wisdom that can shed light on a subject without too great an insistence on methodology.

**David Ivry:**

The National Security Council is supposed to be in charge of the national security concept. In practice, playing that role is complicated by the nature of Israel's political system. By its nature, a coalition government cannot obtain political approval for a security concept. In 1997, I headed a team that discussed security concepts. When we started the formulations, I came to the conclusion that I would be unable to put together a document that the government would approve. On borders, for example, every political party has a different view. The chance of coming up with a government-approved security concept is zero. So we started to formulate an anemic document, one that the government could in fact approve. This is not truly a security concept, but a document that enables its creators to claim that they completed the task.

Furthermore, in practice, principles are often sidelined by day-to-day events. Government discussions are often rejected or postponed following a terrorist attack. Those familiar with Israeli government practices know that every day an emergency overrides a principle, and therefore it is very difficult to conduct discussions of principles.

In practice, the defense establishment prepares a multi-year program, insulated from discussion of day-to-day events, and therefore is able to take initiatives on long-term planning. Through this multi-year plan, the defense establishment's program creates a security concept. The National Security Council should do the same thing: prepare an integrated national multi-year program. However, the Finance Ministry will not allow the National Security Council to do so. The Finance Ministry resembles a corporate financial vice president: interested only in balancing profit and loss. Today, the Treasury, rather than the NSC, is indirectly in charge of national security and the multi-year program, because it can set conditions for a plan or program to be implemented. These conditions can, in effect, render any multi-year national security plan moot. In setting these conditions, the Treasury's interest is devoted exclusively to the budget and balances and not to national security considerations important to the National Security Council.

Therefore, the NSC should be in charge of a multi-year program based on a national security concept and into which the prime minister can insert national projects. However, the NSC can fulfill this function only if it has a backbone, in the form of personnel placement and/or budget control. In order for the National Security Council to have the capacity to play this role, the budget division of the Finance Ministry must move to the Prime Minister's Office. As it stands, the Finance Ministry both plans the budget and implements it. This reflects a lack of proper institutional balance. The proper balance between planning and execution involves execution by the treasury and planning by the budget division in the Prime Minister's Office. Such a balance would ensure mutual reinforcement. The budget division need not be subordinate to the NSC; it can be part of the Prime Minister's Office coordinated by the NSC. What is critical is that the system for planning also be empowered to implement; otherwise, the planning is meaningless.

This process carries significant implications for governance, because in this case the prime minister would also have the opportunity to affect the national security concept through the budget, since the budget is the primary tool for this issue. Therefore, this is virtually the only true way of achieving a more correct use of the NSC's capabilities.

Arriving at a national security concept is in any event impossible given a coalition-based government. On the other hand, the National Security Council could be responsible for setting a multi-year program. Such a multi-year program could become part of public policy because its recommendations would become part of the budget. This would give a number of government institutions a greater incentive to work with the NSC.

Finally, on the issue of the personal relationship between the national security advisor and prime minister, it is a mistake to construct a national organizational approach based on personal relationships. Relationships naturally fluctuate, from excellent to poor, and they cannot be the basis upon which national security is determined.