Chapter 2

The Decision Making Process in Israel

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Introduction

The Lebanon War exposed, and not for the first time, severe deficiencies in matters concerned with strategic decision making in Israel, specifically, the conduct of the political echelon and the relationship of the political leadership with the military. Unlike other matters and contrary to popular opinion, the ability to change the situation and correct these flaws is not conditional on any political price or confrontation with the defense establishment. Nor will changing the situation incur an economic or organizational expense. If this is true, then why does the flawed situation continue? This essay focuses on defining the problem and describing its manifestations in the Second Lebanon War, and concludes with a proposal on what can be done.

Defining the Problem

There are two reasons for the weakness of the decision making framework in Israel. The first is connected with Israel's political structure and the second stems from the prominent absence of an ordered system.

Israel's electoral system and the manner in which governments are set up and then fall create a permanent state of political uncertainty. In my two years serving as head of the National Security Council during Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's term of office, I can point to a mere three weeks in which the coalition was stable and the viability of the government was assured. Within this kind of reality, a prime minister spends most of his time

trying to ensure his political survival. We can visualize the prime minister as a person not only required to make the most important and difficult of decisions, but forced do so while balancing on a log. Clearly most of his attention is focused on trying not to fall. Moreover, the ministers who are supposed to be helping the prime minister are also his rivals, whether closet rivals who are members of his party, or open rivals who are heads of competing parties. This phenomenon induces the prime minister to adopt three modes of conduct:

- Discretion, which leads not only to compartmentalization, but also to forgoing any attempt to conduct businesslike deliberations for fear of leaks.
- Preferring considerations of loyalty over other considerations. For specific discussions or important political tasks the prime minister will prefer an individual whose loyalty (political or personal) he views as beyond question over someone else who is clearly more professionally qualified and proficient.
- Preferring that obligatory formal discussions, governmental meetings for example, deal only with less important issues or with matters that guarantee broad agreement. This way a semblance of governmental regularity is preserved while almost all political risk is avoided.

Even under these restrictions dictated by the political structure, however, it is possible to work differently. Nahum Barnea noted, correctly,

> When all these allegations [against the political system] were voiced after the Second Lebanon War, they contained no small measure of presumptuousness. Throughout the war Olmert enjoyed total freedom of action: his hands were not tied by coalition partners. The right wing opposition in the Knesset backed him. Public opinion was behind him. All of the decisions reached were his own. Olmert was lacking for no power during the war, but rather the opposite was lacking: someone with knowledge and experience who could warn him of rash and untimely decisions.[1]

The absence of a proper administrative system in the office of the prime minister manifested itself in two dimensions: the lack of staff and the absence of appropriate processes. Who constitutes the prime minister's staff? Seemingly it is the government itself. Ministers are in

charge of particular areas, and all bear shared responsibility. In a simplistic analogy to a military body, one could argue that the prime minister is the "commander," the minister of health is the "medical officer," the minister of education is the "education officer," and so on. But clearly this is not the situation. Rather, in the same analogy, it would be more precise to liken the prime minister to a division commander and his ministers to brigade commanders, each in charge of a particular sector. True, they are generally committed to the "division" (the government), but surely they do not constitute the commander's "staff officers."

Who, therefore, constitutes the prime minister's staff? On the one hand, the prime minister has no staff at all, yet on the other, he has two partial staffs, both of which are handicapped. One "staff" is composed of the prime minister's personal aides, three or four officials in charge of particular areas: a military secretary, a political advisor, an intelligence expert, and occasionally an additional person, for example, the head of a political-security branch under Prime Minister Ehud Barak, or Dov Weisglass, who, without any formal title or office, advised Prime Minister Sharon on major political matters.

The advantage of this staff is that its members are close to the prime minister, from a physical standpoint and also as full partners in his deliberations. The drawback is that this staff is smaller than a battalion staff (an operations officer also has operations sergeants). There is no way that three or four individuals, qualified as they might be, can constitute the strategic headquarters of the Israeli government. The pace of events in Israel and the country's constant state of political delirium create a situation in which the prime minister needs these individuals urgently several times each day. They become his "emissaries," surely unable to simultaneously conduct methodical staff work.

The second "staff" is the National Security Council (NSC). Its advantage lies in its relative size and its ability to conduct methodical processes. The drawback is the inadequate connection between the NSC and the prime minister. Moreover, between these two partial staffs, advisors on the one hand and the NSC on the other, there is not enough coordination – certainly no arrangement that determines which person is in charge of what. For that matter, it would be a mistake to think it is possible to split staff work into two parts, one entity in charge of routine matters and the other in charge of

working on infrastructure. It would also be mistaken to think it is possible to divide up the work so that one body produces position papers and the other is in charge of their implementation.

The lack of a viable staff leads to a situation where basic processes are not conducted. There is no procedure for timely situation assessments. The nature of strategic changes is that they occur within a cumulative process. When there is no system in place for a periodic methodical examination of fundamental assumptions, a dangerous opportunity for surprises is created. In addition, there is no procedure for the suitable preparation of deliberations with the prime minister. In the best case, the right discussion is held with the right people, and is focused on the right issue. But beyond the technical convening of the meeting, who is the prime minister's person in charge of staff work prior to the discussion? Who conducts a preliminary discussion that can help to maximize the main deliberations? Who prepares alternatives and then checks the implications of each? The answer in most cases is . . . no one! The instances where the NSC has initiated and insisted on spearheading an issue are far more the exception than the rule.

A good example of this concerns the village of Rajar. At the end of 2005 a working meeting was held between the prime minister and the head of the General Security Services (GSS). Due to the security problem in the village (whose northern section, according to the Blue Line, is in Lebanon and its southern section in Israel), the GSS recommended that Israel erect a wall between the village's two sections. Not only did the prime minister agree; he was angry it hadn't yet been done, as he had decided on this measure two months prior. But who knew about this? Who was supposed to make sure that others also knew? Who was responsible for implementation? By chance, the issue came to the attention of the NSC and it was determined that erecting a wall in the middle of the village would have far reaching implications. In the legal area, for example, it turned out it would be necessary to change the Golan Heights Law and enact a new "evacuation-compensation" law or, alternatively, change Israel's citizenship law. Thus staff work proved, to the security systems as well, that erecting a wall in the middle of the village would not be the correct action. This is an example of the exception that proves the rule. And the rule is there are no rules.

Implications

Four outcomes result from this lack of an appropriate staff and the absence of methodological systems. They can be illustrated with the experience of the Second Lebanon War.

The first lapse concerns the lack of alternatives. In the government meeting held on July 12, 2006, immediately after news of the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hizbollah, the IDF presented its recommendations. Government ministers were placed in a situation where they had only two options: either approve or reject the military's proposal. Non-approval meant not doing anything, something which on that day was perceived as impossible. The outcome was clear.

What should have happened at the discussion? A representative of the government staff – a mythical position, in Israel's current reality – should have presented the government with at least three alternatives, namely:

- An air force retaliatory action aimed at choice Hizbollah targets (long range missiles whose locations were well known) and at the Lebanese infrastructure. This action would last 24-48 hours and then conclude because the international community and Hizbollah would ask for a ceasefire. This limited action would neither bring back the kidnapped soldiers nor destroy Hizbollah, but it would punish the aggressor, strengthen deterrence, and probably make it more difficult for the organization to act in the future.
- A limited war with more numerous objectives, including dealing a severe blow to Hizbollah's military capability, particularly its rocket launching capability. An action such as this obliges an extensive ground operation lasting several weeks.
- A strategic decision on a limited war, but postponement of action until a later opportunity, thus allowing the army several months to prepare.

Of course there were no such deliberations over alternatives, since there was no one to initiate or prepare them.

The second lapse concerns the ignoring of reality. The correct management of any business or organization obligates set procedures that are independent of isolated large, one-time events. When such procedures, including their review process, are not maintained, the organization/ business functions in a situation whereby only crises are responded to. If

this holds true for a business, then it is certainly valid for a state. When the government convened at that same meeting on July 12 following the kidnapping, not one minister including the prime minister had any notion of the IDF's level of preparedness. This situation could still have been tolerated if the government had a staff branch well versed in the subject; but no such branch exists and consequently there were no routine procedures that regularly examined the IDF's level of preparedness.

In March 2003, the IDF finalized its newest multi-year plan (the "Kela" plan). Construction of the plan was based partly on two events that transpired a short time earlier. The first was Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002, where the IDF reoccupied the cities of the West Bank and placed the Muqata compound in Ramallah under siege; despite grave reports (of the Jenin "massacre" and the collapse of the Palestinian Authority), the Arab world remained indifferent. The conclusion was that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, severe and crisis-ridden as it might be, does not factor into the Arab states' deliberations as to launching a war against Israel, either individually or jointly. The second event was the war in Iraq and with it came the sense that as long as there is a strong American presence in the region, no Arab state will want to wage war against Israel.

The general conclusion was that since there is no entity in the Arab world interested *at present* in a war with Israel (including Hizbollah!), then a war that would erupt between Israel and one of its neighbors would result from one of two situations: either subsequent to a strategic change (a change of regime in one of the neighboring states, an American exodus from Iraq, or a change of similar magnitude), or a war launched by Israel.

Common to both situations is that Israel would have strategic warning of at least several months. This point became critical when the average yearly defense budget stood at about NIS 2.5 billion less than the Kela plan's base budget. In this situation the military rightly decided it would be correct that risk-taking be mainly in the area of war preparedness (inventory levels, technical competence, training levels). Since this area, unlike others, is given to changes and improvement within several months from the issue of a warning, everyone was convinced that enough lead time would be available. It can therefore be said that the government's July 12 decision to go to war "surprised" the army, as decision makers were naturally unaware of the above.

The third implication involves the division of responsibility. Even when the government convenes at the right time, discusses the right issue, and reaches the right decision, "someone" is still needed to translate those decisions into real actions and decide who does what. Consider the home front, for example. Who held ministerial responsibility for the home front? The government could ostensibly decide on one of three reasonable alternatives:

- The Ministry of the Interior: since the main onus for dealing with the home front is on the regional councils and these are under the aegis of the Ministry of the Interior, it is natural for the minister of the the interior to manage this area, with additional functions added to his authorities, including command of the home front.
- The Ministry of Internal Security: this is doubly logical. We are dealing with a true problem of internal security (missiles fired on the home front); moreover the police force, which is the main executing body in this case, is already subject to the minister of internal security.
- The Ministry of Defense: the logic behind this alterative is that the ministry has a staff body ("Melah" – Israel Emergency Economy), has a large organizational apparatus, and is in charge of the Home Front Command.

Each of these alternatives is far preferable to what actually ensued, where no one was assigned responsibility. In this kind of situation responsibility goes to the prime minister. This results in a big delay in the commencement of action, with a great deal of time elapsing until the director general of the prime minister's office realizes that in the absence of any other responsible party *he* is responsible. A further outcome is inefficiency. The prime minister's office, in contrast with the other three alternatives, is not built to serve as an executive body. Why does all this happen? Because there is no staff body to make recommendations on the necessary division of responsibility.

The fourth lapse concerns planning. Strategic initiatives, whether for war or political moves, demand planning. Correct planning must occur in five stages:

1. An analysis of assumptions, which in fact is a description of reality. If we skip this stage we create a hazardous tendency to work under

hidden and unchecked assumptions, some of which are liable to be fundamentally wrong.
2. An analysis of Israel's interests and what it wants to achieve; setting priorities.
3. An analysis of the comprehensive map of interests; this stage is vital when multiple players are involved. In the Lebanon arena there were several interested and influential players.
4. Defining the required achievement: what is realistically achievable in light of the above. What is required, what is possible, and how much interface is there?
5. Tactics: what must be done; what should be announced (and what not), and in what order?

A government in its entirety cannot manage such a procedure. Such a procedure requires a staff body. When no such body exists, action usually begins at the last stage (and in this context, consider the disengagement and convergence plans).

What Must Be Done

An analysis of the present situation and a depiction of its inherent weaknesses were submitted to Prime Minister Sharon. To his credit, he agreed to listen to very tough language in an extremely limited forum. But the prime minister, even if convinced, was not ready for change. It was hoped that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would be more receptive to a new path, but unfortunately this was not so. Olmert did indeed make a change, yet one whose correctness is highly in question. Ofer Shelah wrote:

> [The NSC] will ultimately and officially become a long range planning body, an Israeli code name for the production of paperwork, which will be handed over to the head of staff for review – in the small amount of time left to him from working with government ministries. . . . It is not an exaggeration to say that transferring the Council to Jerusalem would only save transportation costs to its final and inevitable destination – the paper shredder in the boss's office... More important is the fact that in a domain that needed real change, Olmert and Turbowitz opted for cosmetics.[2]

What is truly needed is a change that is relatively easy to effect but whose contribution would be immense. The prime minister must organize his office and decision making apparatus in this way: choose an individual he considers trustworthy in political and security matters, putting twelve employees at his or her disposal. This new body would be called the political-security staff. All of the existing functionaries, first and foremost the NSC, would be cancelled; the roles of political advisor to the prime minister and of the military secretary would be cancelled as independent positions. From this moment forward, this new staff would be the *sole* body responsible for political-security activity in the prime minister's office, the government, and the security cabinet. If any deliberation is held but not properly prepared, the head of staff is responsible; if a deliberation is prepared properly and decisions are made, the head of staff is responsible for translating these into operative steps and following up on their implementation.

This head of staff will be required to conduct timely situation assessments; officially formulate Israel's position on matters in his purview; supervise and approve various actions of the IDF, Ministry of Defense, the Mossad, the Foreign Ministry, and so on (naturally in correct proportions). He will have to prepare a yearly plan for cabinet discussions, conduct preparatory discussions, and be the sole party that presents alternatives to the government.

In this way a proper dialogue will be created between the political and military echelons. It is unwise to begin drafting the structure and nature of such a dialogue only upon the outbreak of a crisis, when highly urgent meetings are required. But most importantly, this staff will be responsible for initiating or examining various political options, not only in real time when a response to an event is demanded, but prior to that time. It is clear that in order to perform his job faithfully, the head of the political-security staff must work closely with the prime minister, be a partner in his meetings with foreign leaders, and be his main emissary for meetings with foreign elements. For the head of staff to successfully carry out his duties, his field of activity must be focused and directed, as is customary in other countries. This simple change does not require any political compromises, nor does it involve a supplement to the budget (actually the opposite is true). And, as

opposed to what is commonly thought, it would not lead to a confrontation with security forces.

The sole difficulty is a difficulty of culture, and here is the main question: can the prime minister of Israel – any prime minister – admit that his knowledge and experience are limited, and that he needs to institutionalize a share of the processes and set up an ordered working method?

Notes

1. *Yediot Ahronot*, September 18, 2006.
2. *Yediot Ahronot*, May 15, 2006.