

# A Warning Light for Civil-Military Relations in Israel

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**The recent friction between Givati Brigade soldiers and leftist activists in Hebron is the tip of the iceberg of extensive and significant phenomena related to the operational conduct of soldiers toward civilians, the responsibility of commanders, and the job of military policing in the Palestinian territories. The incidents also relate to the demographic structure of the units in the zones ridden with ongoing hostilities. Furthermore, regarding the use of force, the friction and the response to it bespeak a conceptual and normative gap between the fighting ranks and a large portion of the public that identifies with it, on the one hand, and the senior command ranks of the IDF, on the other hand. All of these have far-reaching and potentially dangerous consequences for civil-military relations, including between the political and the military echelons in Israel.**

In one recent incident in Hebron, a soldier hit a leftist activist, and in another incident, a soldier was filmed predicting that "Ben-Gvir will put things in order." While the former incident is much more serious, both point to the difficulty in managing and containing friction in areas such as Hebron, in proximity to IDF checkpoints. IDF soldiers are required to display restraint and "normative" or apolitical behavior, as defined by the Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, in face of what they see as taunts and provocation. However, they, who are not necessarily accompanied by older and experienced commanders in their day-to-day missions, are required to cope with tiring, grey, thankless work lacking any social reward – unlike their comrades who are soldiers in special combat units, military intelligence, and technology frameworks, pilots, and the like.

The routine activity of the field ranks is marked by increasing friction with the Palestinian population, along with friction with demonstrators from the leftist side of the political map, including some (but only some) of whom are militant and provocative and seek to change attitudes through provocation and a media and public spotlight on IDF activity in the Palestinian territories. In many cases the soldiers feel that the restraint imposed on them is unviable. Furthermore, when a behavioral and ethical slip occurs, they may be punished with what they see as disproportionate severity and a lack of support from their commanders. A large portion of the public shares this feeling (as evidenced in [a recent survey conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute](#)). These gaps, characteristic of armies in general, when the soldiers on the ground seek greater freedom of operation compared to the restraint that the command imposes on them, were highlighted following the media coverage of the recent incident and the punishment given to the soldier. The event underscores the need to examine the question of relations between the soldiers on the ground and the senior command in particular, and relations between the political leadership and the military leadership in general.

Indeed, with the rise in friction between IDF soldiers and Palestinians in the territories in recent months, there have been increasing numbers of incidents such that occurred in Hebron, though most do not come to the public's attention. Presumably some do not even come to the attention of the senior command ranks. But for those soldiers, and for their families and the social spheres that they come from, the situation has gone too far. It seems that the behavioral and ethical compass of the soldiers on the front lines of the friction differs from that of the senior command. The gap grows when each incident becomes a news event, following which, in many cases, the senior ranks must provide a public, well-publicized response and denounce the behavior of the soldiers. As a result, the frustration of these soldiers grows, and their sense of abandonment grows stronger.

The growing gap should also be seen in the demographic context of the army. In a series of studies over the years, the sociologist Yagil Levy has pointed out the emergence of the "army of the peripheries," the "blue-

collar army" – the regional brigades and some of the infantry brigades, with an emphasis on the Kfir Brigade, but apparently not only. In fact, the vast majority of soldiers serving in the brigades with high friction in the West Bank come from the State of Israel's social and geographic peripheries. Their military service is more dangerous and less rewarding than those serving in military intelligence, technological units, and the IDF's other prestigious units. Furthermore, military service does not train them for integration in the civilian job market after their demanding service, and in many cases they remain on the social sidelines with low chances of mobility. This is no less than a social time bomb. The gap between the soldiers fighting in the field and the command ranks, which also seeps into the lower command levels, creeps into the public sphere. This is indicated by the support for the fighting ranks among a large portion of the public, as well as by the extensive social media attack on the commander of the Tzabar Battalion who punished the soldier involved in the incident in Hebron.

This gap cannot be narrowed via "educational" messages in memos from the Chief of Staff, and certainly not through punitive measures, some of which, quite rightly, are seen by the soldiers and those who support them, as well as by political figures in the public arena, as totally disproportionate. To reduce the gap, it is necessary to operate in a completely different manner. It is not the military leadership that determines the political reality of the continued military presence in the territories; the army must thus determine how to act under the prevailing conditions, which are by law decided by the elected political leadership. The army should understand the feelings of the soldiers and be aware of the broad social and political backing that they have, and in particular, it must reexamine the characteristics of the military command levels on the ground and strengthen the tactical command ranks, which are forced to cope with a complicated and challenging reality in the immediate friction zone.

First, there should be an attempt to reinforce experienced Border Police forces in the various sectors significantly, to ensure the presence of experienced commanders who accompany the soldiers in their mission, to

review restrictions on the movement of civilians in close proximity to IDF positions and checkpoints, to empower the soldiers and the nature of their service, and above all, to develop significant reward mechanisms that will underscore the importance that the army and the State of Israel attribute to their service. Moreover, it is important to diversify the demographic mix of the soldiers and to ensure a more balanced presence of social groups in units in the field. The senior military ranks must be present in a much more evident manner in the friction zones in order to sense up close what occurs there, to identify hardships and problems, and to be proactive in addressing issues. Their presence should convey support to soldiers, with education toward ethical and apolitical behavior in the context of day-to-day problems, and not mainly as a response to events that have spilled over into the headlines.

The intensive activity of IDF forces in the West Bank, an area that is saturated with the media and social networks, exposes not only the increasing violent tension between the IDF and the Palestinian civilian population, but also the conceptual and structural difficulty of a combative and "lethal" army, according to Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, in a world of constabulary (policing) missions. Moreover, this reality reflects the weakness of the army's model, the processes of erosion of the recruitment model, and the fact that the IDF is no longer the "melting pot" of Israeli society that it was, but rather a mechanism that perpetuates social stratification, politicizes stratification, and polarizes.

These join the potential for tension between the political leadership and the military leadership in the emerging circumstances. It is doubtful that the value system presented by the Chief of Staff in relation to events such as those that occurred in Hebron, with an emphasis on restraint in the use of force, reflects the value system of the political leadership. The interpretation given to the circumstances and the incidents by the political leadership, or at least a significant part of it, upon the establishment of the new government, will apparently be materially different than that of the senior military leadership. This means that the political leadership will demand backing soldiers or changing the current orders in a way that is not

compatible with the professional value system of the senior military leadership (for example the demand to change the rules of engagement). This is a recipe for ongoing friction that will quickly reach the media realm and could affect the public's level of confidence in the army.

Indeed, the erosion in the public's level of confidence in the army can already be identified. While the army still maintains its high and prominent place among the public compared to other state institutions, certainly compared to public confidence in the Knesset and the various political parties, it is unquestionably eroding. Even if the Israeli public feels a high level of confidence in the army's capabilities or operational competence, when it comes to the army's conduct as an organization and the quality of its treatment of soldiers – the level of public confidence is much lower (this can also be seen in the Israel Democracy Institute).

This is not the threshold of a crisis, but the midst of one. The incoming government and the incoming Chief of Staff should see the recent events in Hebron as a warning light that calls for new arrangements – the sooner the better.

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Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen