



The Chief of Staff Put to the Test

The Chief of Staff

by Meir Finkel

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Gal Perl Finkel

Unlike other Western countries, in Israel the Chief of the IDF General Staff, commander of the armed forces, is perhaps the most important person in the country after the Prime Minister on all matters of security. He is familiar with the use of military force, he commands the body responsible for the organized staff work most relied on by the government, and he is usually the most experienced man in the room, since most other ministers arrive for cabinet debates with almost no prior relevant knowledge (Shelah, 2015).

Although the Chief of Staff is subordinate to the government, it is hard to imagine a situation when the government would recommend not taking his advice. Prominent examples of this acceptance can be found in the way Chief of Staff Dan Halutz dominated government proceedings during the Second Lebanon War, and the report of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that examined the multiyear Gideon plan, initiated by Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot. According to the report, the government approved the plan almost without examination,

mainly because it was recommended by the Chief of Staff.

That is why this book by Brig. Gen. (ret.) Dr. Meir Finkel, formerly commander of an armored brigade and head of the Dado Center for Military Interdisciplinary Thinking, is so important.

According to the Basic Law: The Military (April 9, 1976), the Chief of Staff is the “supreme command level in the army,” and “subject to the authority of the Government and subordinate to the Minister of Defense.” *The IDF Strategy*, published by Chief of Staff Eisenkot, broadened the scope and defined the Chief of Staff as “commander of the campaign” and “the one who determines the idea and the concept for achieving the mission.” Eisenkot writes that the Chief of Staff performs three unique functions in the IDF: looks at the whole war arena of as a matter of strategy; takes a broad overview of strategy; and takes an operational view that goes beyond the individual services. In effect, he functions as the link between the military and the political echelon, the government, and the cabinet; as an adviser on force buildup and operation; as the overall commander of the army; and as the contractor who implements government decisions on the army.

In this book, Finkel offers his job description for the position: “to interpret and mediate between understandings, decisions, and definitions of the political echelon and the IDF (in all senses—scope, organization, capabilities, and so on) and the way the IDF is used in conflicts, while developing directions for action and formulating advice on political decisions.” As he sees it, the Chief of Staff is responsible for setting priorities for the entire organization and leading the ensuing changes, and for defining the organizational culture, that is, the values of the army and the behavioral norms for commanders and soldiers. For him, the term “IDF culture” covers all values, i.e., behavioral norms, from dedication to the mission, to the approach toward breaches of discipline and sexual harassment.

In the book it is clear that Finkel wishes to show how the institution of Chief of Staff is a unique mixture of the function of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which is familiar from other militaries, with the role of head of the General Staff. Finkel argues that the strength of the institution derives from the weakness of the mediating mechanism between the military system and the political system: the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and the National Security Council.

Research Methodology

While every period has its own challenges and contexts, there are still common features that can be instructive regarding the challenges, responsibilities, and tasks embodied in the institution of the Chief of Staff. At the same time, the author cautions that although he is ostensibly dealing with one position, the Chief of Staff, in fact, he sees it as part of a complex environment—the Minister of Defense, the Prime Minister, the cabinet, the political system, and the General Staff.

The author presents a comparative analysis of how various Chiefs of Staff have functioned with reference to six aspects that he defines as significant. The research is neither historical/documentary nor does it cover all Chiefs of Staff, only 15 of them. The analysis is based on material from the IDF History Department, personal biographies, media reports, and interviews conducted by the author with senior officers and with some of the Chiefs of Staff themselves. He assumes that it will not be possible to make an overall assessment of the term of office of each of those he presents, and indeed, some of the individuals and their approach to various situations are mentioned in several chapters, while others appear in only one chapter.

Finkel has chosen to examine patterns of action and command as reflected by Chiefs of Staff in extreme situations: war, changes in strategy, and changes in force buildup. To that

end he defines six challenges or aspects, and compares how several of these individuals have dealt with similar situations:

1. Identification of a change in reality, followed by activation of appropriate changes in the military
2. Familiarity of a Chief of Staff from a ground force with ways to use the air force in war (and vice versa—familiarity of a Chief of Staff from the air force with the ground forces)
3. The crisis of trust—the Chief of Staff's loss of trust in a general during combat
4. Command of an army in crisis, after a war that is perceived as a failure
5. Initiation of different trends in force buildup
6. Working relations with politicians on force buildup.

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From the start the author acknowledges that there is a difficulty in this comparative study. For example, in the War of Independence, the function of mediating between political understandings and decisions and the actions of the IDF was performed by Defense Minister and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, while in the Sinai Campaign this was the job of Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan. In the Six Day War this role was filled by Northern Command General David (Dado) Elazar, who performed the same function in the Yom Kippur War, but this time as Chief of Staff. During the First Lebanon War, this was the job of Defense Minister Ariel Sharon. In other words, each period or event has additional elements that affect the dialogue

and mediation between the actors, deriving from the strengths and weaknesses of different parts of the system. Nonetheless, the analysis of how some Chiefs of Staff have responded to the challenges allows the author to formulate a conclusion on the nature of their performance, and to deduce from that how each one is likely to respond to a given challenge.

Finkel's analysis is detailed and methodical and offers some eye-opening insights. An instructive example that appears in the chapter about the role of the Chief of Staff in identifying changes in the reality refers to Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and the security zone in Lebanon in 1995. This is particularly important because of the dearth of research and writing about the IDF's 18 years in Lebanon.

Lipkin-Shahak's predecessors perceived the presence of the IDF in the security zone as a normal security action, and no special General Staff efforts were invested in matters such as directing intelligence, organization, or the development of weapons, whereas he, who took on the role in 1995, announced that this was no ordinary security situation, but a war against a terror organization and guerrilla forces. As Chief of Staff, he diverted intelligence resources, oversaw the development of specific weapons and the Egoz Unit to combat Hezbollah, and in general led a determined fight against Hezbollah. The changes ordered by Chief of Staff Lipkin-Shahak had a considerable effect on IDF achievements against Hezbollah in Lebanon, but the author is careful to note that although he correctly identified the change, without the involvement of "agents of change" in the regiments and battalions, it would not have happened.

Assessment

According to Finkel, "The role of the Chief of Staff is a challenging one that demands a thorough understanding of a range of subjects, the ability to lead and command at the level of the supreme authority, sharp senses to identify changes, the ability to initiate processes and handle

opposition to them (internal and external), composure in difficult circumstances, and much more." The author has chosen good test cases to measure each Chief of Staff, and the comparative analysis produces many interesting insights. Inter alia, he states that simply identifying a change is not enough, and it must be backed by tangible actions.

With reference to the challenges faced by a Chief of Staff from the ground forces regarding the air force (and vice versa), Finkel is correct that the supreme commander must be familiar with the force's capabilities and plans, and even be involved in shaping them. However, the structure of the IDF and the fact that the air force is separate from the ground force makes this difficult to implement.

Another conclusion refers to the situation in which the Chief of Staff loses faith in a commander in wartime. Although it is not possible to prevent the tension, it is possible, both before and during the fighting, to create forums for learning in which disagreements can be discussed discreetly while avoiding wars between generals. This happened during Operation Defensive Shield, when there was friction between Chief of Staff Mofaz and GOC Southern Command Yitzhak Eitan, and lessons can be learned from this situation.

The author notes that the range of tasks and areas of responsibility placed on the Chief of Staff are too broad for one person alone. That is why the United States divided the role of commander of the army between the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is responsible for building the force and advising the President on military action, and the heads of regional commands, who are directly subordinate to the President. Since the situation in Israel is different, Finkel lists a number of factors that help the Chief of Staff handle the challenges: personal experience, suitable personnel in supplementary positions (such as a Deputy Chief of Staff from the ground forces, when the Chief of Staff comes from the air force), processes of active learning, and recognition

of the Minister of Defense as a real partner in carrying the burden.

Missing from the Book

Although the research is comprehensive, it avoids dealing with many aspects of the Chief of Staff's job. Of course, any research study is subject to this claim, but it could be argued that the role of the Chief of Staff regarding how Israel deals with the threat of nuclear weapons, an issue that was and remains relevant, should be examined and analyzed. Although many of the debates on how to deal with the Iranian nuclear program and the question of whether or not to attack remain classified, it is possible to discuss the role of Chiefs of Staff Rafael Eitan and Gabi Ashkenazi in the discussions prior to the attacks on the nuclear reactors in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007), in leading the preparations for the missions and their consequences, and to draw conclusions from this regarding future processes.

The challenges of force buildup analyzed in the chapter on commanding the army in a crisis, as they relate to Gabi Ashkenazi's term of office, lack the background information that it was necessary to prepare the army for a campaign that could erupt in the north only a year after the end of the Second Lebanon War, because Hezbollah and the Syrian army were likely to respond and events could easily escalate into a war (Katz, 2019).

Some time later, Ashkenazi said that when he assumed the position, he defined the Syrian nuclear threat "as the first and top priority for the IDF. It was clear that we had to destroy this reactor, but my definition was to destroy it without deteriorating into war, but if it did deteriorate into war—to be capable of winning it" (Ben-Yishai & Somfalvi, 2018). Later publications show that the option of attacking from the air, supported in the discussions by the Chief of Staff and Commander of the Air Force Eliezer Shkedi, was the option that the cabinet, led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, chose to approve (Katz, 2019). Clearly, the Chief

of Staff had a decisive influence on how the action was carried out as well as responsibility for its possible outcomes, including war.

Two principal insights emerge from this book. The first is the importance of the Chief of Staff in the processes of building the force, since he plants seeds whose fruits will only be enjoyed by his successor or the one after that. The second insight in the book is that the supreme test of a Chief of Staff is war, and in war, according to US General Douglas MacArthur, "there's no substitute for victory."

Another element that is missing in the book concerns the military background of the various Chiefs of Staff. No one is born a Chief of Staff. He has grown up in the military system, starting as a new recruit, then a junior commander, becoming a senior commander, and finally the commander of the whole army. This route determines his expertise in the various fields, and it is not surprising that in the chapter on the professionalism of Chiefs of Staff, the author examines the performance of ground force commanders in the operation of the air force during fighting. For example, when Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi was appointed after the Second Lebanon War and was required to rehabilitate the IDF ground forces, the fact that he rose through the ranks of the Golani infantry brigade, and throughout his service commanded ground forces in fighting and in routine, had immense significance (Hendel & Katz, 2012).

Conclusion

This fascinating book is an important resource for a better public understanding of the role of the Chief of Staff, his responsibilities, and the challenges he faces. One important challenge is to shape the IDF's fighting spirit and its sense of capability. In a 2019 post on his Facebook page, MK Ofer Shelah wrote about his experiences from 1979, when he participated as a soldier

in the Paratroopers Brigade in Operation Menorah in southern Lebanon, the first raid in which he participated. Shelah stated that he was very impressed by the professional calm demonstrated by the commander of the Paratroopers Brigade at that time, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, and the commander of his battalion Shaul Mofaz (both future Chiefs of Staff). He wrote that the IDF of those days was less professional and powerful than Israel's army is today, but "it had a spirit of attack and raid, commanders that you followed without hesitation, the focus of an army that starts each day with preparations for war." Shelah wrote that the job of the current Chief of Staff, Aviv Kochavi, who also served under Mofaz in the Paratroopers, is "to instill a similar spirit in the army of our time." The challenge facing Kochavi is the one that faces every Chief of Staff and remains as central as ever, as demonstrated by the author in his examination of the actions of Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, designed to change the IDF fighting spirit before the Sinai Campaign.

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