

The Winograd Report: For the Drawing Board, not the Shelf

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As expected, the publication of the final report by the Commission for the Examination of the 2006 Campaign in Lebanon was accompanied by a media and political uproar. Because of the nature of the report, which departs from the partial report published in April 2007 that assigned personal responsibility to the prime minister, the defense minister, and the IDF chief of staff, the tumult is likely to ebb over time. The question is what will remain of this detailed and important report. Will it be shelved, gathering dust like past reports, or will it, together with the partial report that preceded it, serve as a springboard for repairing the severe failures and shortcomings that it exposed “in the decision making processes and staff work of both the political and military echelons, and in the interface between them.”

Despite the relatively tempered language of the final report, at least in the opinion of those who expected a more vociferous tone, nothing could be more trenchant than its discussion of the weaknesses of Israel’s governmental system in the most sensitive areas as revealed during the supreme test of wartime. Actually, the Winograd report should be regarded as a timely warning that if genuine and far-reaching changes are not instituted in Israel’s political and military decision making processes, Israel is liable to find itself both facing dangerous situations that jeopardize its very sovereign existence and missing opportunities for peace. As Judge Winograd stated when the report was issued, “Israel will be unable to survive in this region and will be unable to live in it in peace or even calm, unless it itself and those in the surrounding environment believe that Israel possesses the political and military leadership, military capabilities, and social resil-

ience that will enable it to deter those wishing it harm, and prevent them – including by force – from achieving their goals.”

For this reason, a thorough study of the report, particularly its system-wide conclusions and institutional recommendations, is of critical importance. For Israel’s official establishment, especially its political, security, and military leaderships, there is no escaping the lessons of the report, the need to adopt specific recommendations from it – or others that meet the challenges presented in it – and verification of their practical implementation in a planned, orderly, and supervised process. Any other measures will squander the opportunity that faces Israel, and at a very high price.

Even if the committee’s recommendations should not be regarded as Holy Scripture, they are worthy of serving as a basis for an ongoing and thorough systematic reform. Although the committee’s fourteen recommendations (chapter 18 of the report) are formulated in general terms and at times border on the theoretical, it is important to see what underlies them and to decide which require bold and concrete action. It is particularly imperative to relate to several key issues concerning the political leadership. Perhaps the most important and difficult is the committee’s first recommendation: to direct, guide, and supervise the activity of the professional echelon in security and foreign policy bodies (p. 578). As if it were self-evident, the explanation accompanying this recommendation states, “No proper division of labor was maintained between the political and professional echelons, especially in the IDF.” This comment bespeaks a serious lapse that has prevailed in Israel for many decades: the defense establishment and the IDF are still granted an exceptional status that accords them seniority in planning and in decision making process-

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es on key national issues. There are many important and objective reasons for this. The political and bureaucratic background is known. Nevertheless, without a change in the balance between the components of the equation and confinement of the IDF and the defense establishment to their proper roles in a democratic system, under constant supervision and direction, the painful picture exposed in the Second Lebanon War – which is more than a function of the personalities involved – will not be rectified.

Given past experience, there is reason for skepticism as to prospects that the political echelon will draw the necessary conclusions and implement genuine reform. What has or has not been done until now with respect to the partial report's recommendations concerning the National Security Council (and the recommendations of the Shahak Commission for their implementation) does not augur well that past mistakes will be corrected.

It is to be hoped that the chances for reform are better at the military level, though here too, the work is extensive and difficult. The report is blunt and harsh: "In general, the armed forces failed to provide an adequate military solution to the challenge it faced in managing the war in Lebanon. It did not render the political leadership with an appropriate military basis for diplomatic activity." Here too the failures and lapses documented in the report are probably not based only on the familiar conjectural and technical pitfalls listed in the chapters dealing with the military. More profound and disturbing is the erosion of basic values and standards in the IDF, such as commitment to the mission, the will to win, and military discipline. Like many others, the Commission believes that this erosion reflects some of the underlying processes in Israeli society, which have naturally penetrated into the military. Only dealing with these in a comprehensive way will create a genuine chance of essential change in the defense establishment.

The main question now is not what happened to the IDF in the Second Lebanon War and the years preceding it, but the underlying reasons for the IDF's questionable performance. Is it possible that the IDF rests on shaky foundations? The Commission itself touched on this basic question, but it did not provide a substantive answer to

it. The report stated: "Nothing in the report can fully and adequately explain the IDF's weak performance...that is why there is a need to attempt to identify and understand the underlying factors." In this regard, the Winograd Commission passed the buck. It expressed the hope that its rather general comments "will stimulate thought to complete the discussion...and also – and above all – indicate the scope of the requisite examination, and the dimensions of the chore of restoring the IDF's capabilities to an optimal level, given the changing challenges" (p. 556).

In light of this report, there is something disturbing in recent statements that the IDF has already been rehabilitated and that its current level of functioning is completely different from that of the summer of 2006. Additional cause for concern is that most of the public continues to express almost blind faith in the IDF (the Dahaf poll published in *Yediot Ahronot* on February 1 noted that 77 percent of the respondents said their opinion of the IDF had not changed, and 75 percent believed the IDF drew appropriate conclusions from the war. A similar survey conducted for *Maariv* by the Teleseker Institute found that 80 percent of the respondents said they had confidence in the IDF). This initial data is liable to indicate a continuation of the familiar and alarming trend represented in: "The IDF is fine. If only allowed, it would be able to win." Is that the really the case?

A change in the disturbing picture painted by the Winograd Commission is a matter of deep processes that will have to continue for many years. What has been damaged over a period of many years cannot be repaired with stopgap measures. A great deal of difficult and prolonged work still faces the defense establishment. This is true in both practical technical spheres, which are easier to handle, and perhaps even more so in areas that are more difficult and complex, such as military thinking and the spirit and values of the IDF. Political and public supervision is essential to monitor the implementation by the IDF of these profound processes. The government, the Knesset (through the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee), the state comptroller, and the news media must play a critical long term role in this endeavor. It would not be wise to leave the work only to the IDF.