Is the General the Policymaker?

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Shooting and Not Crying: The New Militarization of Israel in the 2000s
by Yagil Levy
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The main theme of Yagil Levy's new book is how political logic is shaped by military logic. What prompted this book is likely Israel's policy toward Hamas, which is characterized, in the words of former IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, by the desire to deny the enemy its fighting capability, until it is completely quelled. Kochavi even specifically stated that the army must be lethal (p. 260). The drive to defeat the enemy by exerting violent power is contrary to what Levy expects: a statesmanlike approach that would transform Hamas into a sovereign governing entity, tempered by the responsibility incurred by its new status (p. 81).

Furthermore, Levy attributes the rise of military logic among those who would be expected to spout political logic not only to the government, which adopted the Eisenkot-Kochavi doctrine (p. 83), but also to the Israeli left, which, during Operation Protective Edge, joined those who regard Hamas as a terrorist organization (p. 81). Thus, the author claims, instead of looking at the full picture, which includes political prospects, Israeli decision makers, and in fact the entire Israeli public, have been possessed by an approach whereby military prowess has created a belief in our ability to eliminate the military threat lying at our door, ruling out the need for a political solution. Levy calls this process, in which the means (military, force) justifies the end (minimizing casualties) and imposes military logic, "instrumental rationalism" (p. 90). This perception constitutes, according to Levy, the main element in the new militarization of the political culture in Israel; for its part, the new militarization is the common denominator of a series of phenomena, from banning organizations such as B'Tselem from appearing at high schools to the supporting voices that accompanied Elor Azaria on his way to court (pp. 188-189).

The book is constructed in an organized, even didactic manner, and begins with a description of the research field. Levy systematically makes sure to establish his claims on a robust theoretical foundation, starting with an in-depth discussion, based on existing literature, of the terms militarization and legitimacy, and ending with breaking down more complex terms, such as the one he calls "the militarization paradox." This new term describes the historical processes through which modern social arrangements that spurred citizens to be engaged in managing the country, and managing political power as a result, were supposed to impose dominant anti-violent norms. Yet it was the gap between the political culture and the violent reality that generated the dire need of state institutions to justify organized violence.

Joining the theoretical foundation is a historical review that allows the readers to track the chronology of the development of

militarization in the State of Israel. In addition, the review also includes the evolution of the understanding of the limits of power within Israel society at historic milestones, such as the Yom Kippur War, followed by the Camp David Accords, the Lebanon War, the first intifada, the Gulf War, and the unilateral withdrawals (from Lebanon and Gaza). Levy presents geopolitical processes, including an international regime that acts according to specific norms, the mitigation of the sense of existential threat in Israel since the 1980s, and the transition of Israeli society from republican to liberal approaches. Along with these processes, which were expected to strip the society of any militaristic approaches, Levy describes in detail other processes, some of which took place in tandem: the Oslo Accords, the second intifada, and the failure of the Camp David Summit in 2000, which led to a threat on the ethno-national identity, and actually to a reversal of the trend of demilitarization.

Following the definitions and the historical review, the author describes the internal logic behind the explanation for the increasing justification of violence within Israeli society. He presents the book's primary challenges: mapping the characteristics of the new militarization; identifying the explanations for this phenomenon; and attempting to understand the ways in which the militaristic political culture is translated into justification of violence. Throughout the book, with its abundance of analyses and examples, Levy thoroughly explores these challenges, which he positions as road signs to chart his path.

The book's principal claim is that the promotion within the society of the justification for the use of military force—and particularly among the middle class, which is at the base of a democratic society—requires a reduction in the costs of maintaining the conflict (p. 16). Only the reduction of the economic burden of the war and fewer casualties enable the creation of a society that accepts with understanding the exercise of military violence, and often supports it. Levy details the elements of the new militarization and dedicates a separate chapter to each of these elements.

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The first element is the weakening affinity between the use of force and political logic, in effect turning political logic into military logic. This chapter is based mainly on Levy's perception, shared by others, that a considerable part of military confrontations, such as Operations Cast Lead (2008) or Protective Edge (2014) were the result of an Israeli failure. According to this premise, Israel could have taken other measures, especially the establishment of a Palestinian state that includes Gaza. It was the turning of political logic into military logic that prevented it. One way or another, this chapter deals to a considerable extent with how instrumental rationalism, namely focusing on tactics (such as targeted assassinations or target banks), underlies Israeli policy (pp. 57-111).

The second element is the way in which the army and politicians alike, as well as actors in the civil sphere, blur the political logic behind the use of force. Levy points to what he calls "creating ignorance as a means for political legitimacy," using as an example the concealment of facts from the public: emphasizing violations of agreements by Israel's enemies while ignoring any violations by Israel (pp. 117-142). The third element is the way in which dehumanization of Arab combatants and leaders has been transformed into dehumanization of Arab society as a whole (pp. 143-176).

The fourth element is the social phenomenon—unlike in the past—of publicly highlighting and displaying violence as a source of pride. To that end, violence undergoes verbal

transformation and normalization, in a form of language laundering. Various terms are formulated to illustrate destruction and killing in way that sounds more pleasant to a civilized ear: surgical action, thwarting, clearing, and so on. Levy also follows the social transformations that have occurred in the IDF, mainly in combat units. He focuses on the argument that the entry of groups that were previously excluded from elite units, primarily religious and Jews of Eastern origin, has also brought about explicit manifestations of the perceptions of such groups and cultivated a new violent discourse. Such a discourse emphasizes, for example, the motive of vengeance as justification for violence. Another example is the use of biblical expressions, such as Amalek or Philistines, when referring to Arabs (pp. 177-264).

The fifth element is the occurrence of intra-military processes, mainly what Levy terms as "Judaization of the army." As part of his perception of this term, he uses the example of the document titled "Destiny and Uniqueness" of 2004, which, with the blessing and authorization of then-Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon, defined the IDF as the army of a country in which Jewish identity forms the core of the national identity of the State of Israel. These processes are accompanied by extra-military processes, mainly the harnessing of the education system to the needs of the army and sealing the army against liberal influences by civil society. The army recruits schools for this mission, actually using them as part of the enlistment process; alongside this propaganda-like activity, the army also encourages technological education in the geographic periphery in order to increase the number of recruits joining technological units (pp. 266-288).

The sixth element is what Levy calls "the unintended paradox," where liberalism absurdly becomes a significant factor in winning hearts and minds for the full justification of the exertion of military violence. In this chapter, Levy discusses a variety of activities in different fields, all boiling down to a presentation of an army whose activities are accepted with understanding by those espousing liberal views: human rights organizations overseeing the army; international law; a technological image focusing on efficiency and precision killing; sensitivity to human lives that transfers the risk from IDF soldiers to the enemy; individualization of bereavement, which leads to depoliticization of the victims; and feminist militarism, which promotes women's roles and their motivation to adopt the full military approach in the name of gender equality (pp. 290-370).

The book is masterfully built, with Levy raising the construction of his claims to no less than an artistic level. However, notwithstanding the strength of the author's thesis, I would like to present several reservations. Levy's approach, evident in his previous works, binds together the support of violence and the reduction of the costs of the conflict (pp. 41-47). This perception entails a neo-Marxist element, which ascribes the understanding of people's behavior to their economic motives. Accordingly, Levy even calls militarism in its older format "materialistic militarism." Quite a few researchers of political psychology might disagree with this approach and find other collective motives for supporting fighting, many of which are actually contrary to the personal economic interest. For example, the increased and often costly participation of religious Zionists in the various fronts can have other explanations, originating from concepts of group identity, such as a national story (narrative) or a civil religion.

Remaining faithful to his neo-Marxist perception, Levy claims that Israel has experienced a breach of the republican agreement between the army and the middle class, which has led to a decrease in the motivation for conscription (p. 35). Full disclosure: this is the tip of the iceberg of a longstanding debate that I have with Yagil Levy. While Levy claims the existence of a contract based on an equation that includes a reward, even if merely a symbolic one, I believe that the essence of republicanism is the view of loyal

citizenship as a moral value and a civil virtue in its own right. Therefore, I am not convinced that the motivation for drafting is actually disintegrating; quite the opposite—the large-scale military campaigns fought by the IDF in recent decades, such as Defensive Shield (2002), Cast Lead (2008), and Protective Edge (2014), were characterized by high fighting spirit in the regular army, as well as the reserves, and not to a lesser extent, civilian voluntary initiatives for supporting the fighting forces that flourished among the civil society.

Levy's historical review also contains some arguable interpretation. According to his perception, Gush Emunim promoted an ethno-national discourse that was materially different from the official state republican discourse supported by the secular elite (p. 33). This interpretation, consistent with Levy's approach, whereby religionization processes are underway in society in general and the military in particular, is not compatible with very significant elements of the statism approach, led by David Ben-Gurion until his departure from the center of the political stage in the 1960s: consider only the message sent by the Prime Minister to the soldiers and commanders of Brigade 9 following the occupation of Sharm el-Sheikh in 1956, in which he defined the state as the "third Kingdom of Israel."

The rationale behind Levy's thesis, that the state has entered an informal contract with militias of settlers performing acts of violence against Palestinians, is unclear (p. 52). Regarding the so-called hilltop youth as militias is not in line with sociological studies that follow this phenomenon and its implications (Mash et al., 2018; Friedman, 2017). Likewise, referring to the authorities granted to military security coordinators in the territories as proof of the delegation of military authorities to the settlers (p. 53) does not reflect the situation precisely. Security coordinators are qualified to perform the military roles based on full military training, and are subject to military command and law. Due to security circumstances, the role of military coordinators in the territories is indeed broader than within Israel proper, but their authorities are anchored in law (IDF—Order no. 432). Therefore, referring to military coordinators as a local militia is no different than referring to reserve units as militias. Even the argument that the policing army serves as a "gray arm" of the state to promote creeping annexation (p. 51) is somewhat of a conspiracy theory. On the contrary, under Israeli control and IDF supervision, Palestinian construction has seen unprecedented expansion in recent years (Ministry of Intelligence, 2021). The Civil Administration's disregard of most instances of this phenomenon may even raise the suspicion that the policing army prefers "industrial quiet," even at the cost of potential future loss of vast territories.

In the chapter on the second element of the new militarism, and particularly the issue of ignorance, Levy mentions the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in general, and the former Executive Director of INSS, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin in particular, as an example of a knowledge agent encouraging ignorance. According to Levy, the Institute's research dealing with Iran's nuclearization lacks depth; it presents the threat as an established fact that does not require any clarification, and hence lacks any discussion of value (pp. 126-128). As a follower of INSS publications, I question this argument. The last annual strategic assessment report of 2023, presented by INSS to President Herzog, is a solid counter-example; actually, the three issues leading the list of security threats in the report are the relations between Israel and the US administration, the implications of the judicial reform, and the Palestinian arena (Hayman et al., 2023). I believe that it would be wiser to look for the propagators of ignorance, as Levy puts it, in other places.

As part of his discussion of dehumanization, Levy quotes former Israel Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh and former Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon, and claims that their attitude toward the issue of *shahids* (Muslim martyrs), is

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nothing short of a moral exclusion of the entire Palestinian society (pp. 152-153). According to Levy, this pattern, which has accompanied the Zionist movement since its early days, is to a certain degree an expression of racism. Without completely denying Levy's perception of the element of dehumanization, it seems to me that the main theme of this chapter could have been shaped without being drawn completely into the Palestinian narrative. This issue—the acceptance of the correctness of the Palestinian view of the conflict—is evident in other parts of the book as well, such as the description of Raed al-Karmi as a military activist who was a member of the Fatah organization (p. 94). One may support Levy's claim that Karmi's assassination occurred at a wrong time and led to an escalation, as is also claimed by others (for instance, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland); but even those arguing that this action was damaging could use a bit more accurate attributes than "military activist" to describe Karmi, or at least mention that his so-called military activity amounted mainly to mass killing—including with his own participation—as well as planning lethal terrorist attacks and supervising their execution.

My most serious reservation was about the comparison in the chapter on the fifth element—between Jewish education in the army (to Levy: Judaization) and the activities of the Nazi Wehrmacht (p. 275). Admittedly, prior to this comparison he notes that the comparative aspect does not offer a complete historical analogy, but this sentence in itself does not eliminate the clear comparison. Levy could have made his point even without this blunder.

In his conclusion, Levy presents three cumulative conditions that he believes could stop the wheels of militarization: a significant increase in the costs of the conflict (in political and economic terms, as well as the death toll); exhaustion of all military options; and a confidence-inspiring peace initiative (pp. 381-382). It seems that for those observing the conflict realistically, these possibilities—all of which, according to Levy, must be fully realized—leave very little hope for a different future in our region.

In conclusion, the book offers a thorough, detailed, and systematic analysis of processes underway within Israeli society and reflected in its civil-military relations. The original arguments presented in a structured form build on the academic studies of other scholars, as well as the previous writings of the author himself. I recommend even those who disagree with Levy's approach to read the sociological analysis presented in the book. One does not necessarily have to accept all claims, but this is definitely a worthwhile work encouraging thinking out of the box in which many of us live.

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