

On Israel's Sensitive, Tense Civil-Military Relations

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Troubling tensions have surfaced recently between Israel's political leadership and the heads of the security establishment, mainly regarding the operational fitness of the IDF in light of the measures taken by senior reservist officers, particularly in the Air Force. Such tensions are not new, but in the context of the profound existing socio-political crisis, the fact that they have penetrated the discourse among those who are responsible for national security severely harms their trust toward one another, and that of the public in both the government and the military. This destructive phenomenon must be halted immediately; responsibility for this rests with the political echelon. How the political and military leadership (including the Israel Security Agency / Shin Bet and the Mossad) should interface has not been addressed adequately, beyond what is included in the Basic Law: The Military and the traditional interaction between them. As part of the dialogue needed to extricate Israel from the current crisis, it is vital to formulate a system of clear values and practical arrangements for this critical issue, either as an amendment to the law or within a specially designated ethical code. This will help avoid politicization of civil-military relations.

Among the many manifestations of the protest against the government's judicial overhaul are personal notifications by officers in the IDF reserves – mainly, but not exclusively, in the Air Force and Military Intelligence – regarding their intention to consider halting or suspending their voluntary reserve service. In some cases, these intentions have already translated into action. Against the backdrop of this unusual phenomenon and given its severe implications for the operational fitness and cohesion of the IDF, poignant tensions between top political leaders and senior military commanders have surfaced. Although the public has not been exposed to the precise and full nature of these clashes, it is obvious that they are severe and, in some cases,

involve implied threats to senior IDF figures. This destructive phenomenon demands a thorough examination in order to institutionalize sensitive, delicate civil-military relations.

The fundamental question of how the political and the security echelons (including the Shin Bet and Mossad) should interface has never been fully and formally addressed, beyond what is noted in the Basic Law: The Military and the traditional interaction between them. The Basic Law: The Military stipulates in general terms that the IDF “is subject to the authority of the government” and that “the chief of staff is subject to the authority of the government and is subordinate to the minister of defense.” The law does not detail what that authority includes, what the nature of the relationship should be, and what is the role of the prime minister in this tapestry of relations. For precisely this reason, the current tensions, against the backdrop of the socio-political crisis that has been raging for the past eight months, demand a fundamental examination of this critically sensitive issue, from the prism of ethics and principles to the level of guidelines and rules of conduct.

This examination of the relationship should address both sides: the senior military commanders, and the prime minister and government ministers.

- IDF commanders must act to fulfill the goals and objectives of the military, always, everywhere, and under all circumstances, in accordance with the values of the IDF, which are detailed in the document “Spirit of the IDF.” Included among them are “defending the state, its citizens, and residents,” “stateliness,” “responsibility,” “reliability,” “personal example,” and “professionalism.” There is no doubt that the chief of staff and the senior officers who seek to present to the prime minister, the cabinet, and members of the Knesset committees the full picture regarding the IDF’s readiness, and their assessment of what future developments might hold, are acting in accordance with these values.

In his discourse with the political leadership, the chief of staff, like any commander, is expected to present his clear, detailed professional opinion on any issue raised, based on pertinent considerations and staff work done under his authority. In so doing, he directly serves the general interest and enables the political echelon to make informed decisions. Such conduct is not only appropriate but also has a clear value in maintaining public trust in the IDF and its senior commanders. This trust assures citizens that the IDF is doing its utmost for them, in accordance with its goals and values. This assumption is also valid regarding the other security services, even though their conduct is less sensitive than that of the IDF’s top echelon, which has the overall responsibility for national security and the unique standing as “the people’s army.”

- The initial point for examining the conduct of the political echelon is entirely different. There is no code of ethics for members of the Israeli government. Attempts to formulate such a code – the Shamgar Commission and the

Ne'eman Commission – failed. This failure is reflected in statements by several government ministers that hardly meet the fundamental values of “stateliness,” “responsibility,” and “professionalism.” And while they contribute to tensions surrounding the IDF’s level of preparedness, they touch on a much broader spectrum and include some flagrant ad hominem attacks by ministers and Knesset members against senior IDF officers.

As the starting point for examining the adequate conduct of the political echelon in its interface with the military leadership, consider a document adopted by the British government, which presents agreed guidelines for people serving in public positions, either elected or appointed. The “Seven Principles of Public Life” is also known as the “[Nolan Principles](#),” after the first chairman of the committee that formulated the text in 1995. Of these principles, focus here is on those that should guide the Israeli prime minister and his government in their interactions with the military leadership (or with other state organs).

The first principle – selflessness – proposes that holders of public office act solely in terms of general interest, without any discrepancy due to personal or sectoral considerations. In this light, the reported instruction by the Prime Minister to the chief of staff to maintain the IDF’s level of readiness despite the ongoing reservists’ protest raises some questions: when the Prime Minister instructs the chief of staff to carry out his basic job description, one cannot help but wonder what hidden agenda motivated this instruction that, prima facie, appears to be devoid of content and could even be interpreted as insulting.

Another principle calls for objectivity, including the use of “the best evidence” available and without personal or sectoral bias. In the framework of its responsibility as the senior civil overseer of the military, the political echelon must treat the military as a highly professional resource. Politicians must discuss the recommendations of the military with complete trust. Accusations by politicians about “political considerations” influencing some of the assessments submitted by the military (such as regarding the IDF’s position on the maritime border agreement with Lebanon) clearly violate this principle. The assessments of the chief of staff and other senior officers must be accepted as a clear manifestation of their responsibility and professionalism. Where there are disagreements on matters of security, as is the case presently, the discussions between the civilian and military echelons must be conducted with mutual respect and integrity. When there are differences of opinion, it is the role of the political echelon to make the final decision; it must always be well-informed and based on pertinent considerations.

According to the principle of objectivity, it would be unreasonable for a prime minister to refuse to see a chief of staff who asked to present him with information of great importance – which is reportedly what happened when Prime Minister Netanyahu refused a request by Chief of Staff Halevi to convene the cabinet ahead of a vote on the cancellation of the reasonableness standard,

where he wanted to present ministers with an update on the IDF's fitness and related ramifications. This kind of refusal raises concern over the quality of the decisions by the political echelon, without being exposed to information the military echelon wanted to present it. This also invites concern that the security decision making process could be tainted by extraneous considerations.

In the current Israeli context, it may be worth considering the addition of another principle, namely, that any decision that translates into an order to the military leadership must be legal according to the laws of the State of Israel and international law.

Against this background, much concern has been voiced of late about the level of (dis)trust between the political echelon and the military leadership. There have always been disagreements between them. However, in the current context, the penetration of the profound disagreements that exist within Israeli society into the discourse among those who are responsible for national security has severely harmed the mutual trust between the political echelon and the military, and the already polarized public's trust in both the government and the military. This destructive phenomenon must be ended immediately. When top politicians cast aspersions on the character of top commanders and accuse them of making unprofessional decisions that are not based on Israel's security interests, they puncture the trust in the IDF and its commanders. Considering this fissure, it is hard to expect reserve officers to trust their commanders who do not trust the political level, which pressures the military commanders to the point of threats. It is no coincidence that reservists keep asserting that their decision to suspend their voluntary service stems from their lack of trust in the government and that they have no issue with their commanders. Responsibility for rectifying the situation rests with the political echelon.

As part of the dialogue needed to extricate Israel from the current crisis, it is vital to formulate an agreed system of clearly defined values and practical guidelines to address the complex issue of civil-military relations, so as to neutralize the politicization of the interface between them. There are those who argue that the ambiguity of the Basic Law: The Military is deliberate and designed to leave room for interpretation. It now seems that there is no choice but to find the best possible framework to codify the proper conduct within that relationship, for the sake of national security – be that as an amendment to the Basic Law or within a designated and authoritative ethical code.

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