

The Attacks on Israel's Security Leadership: More than Populism and Bad Manners

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The unprecedented attacks against senior IDF officers and the heads of Israel's other security organizations are not just an attempt to blame them for the severe damage to the fitness and cohesion of the military caused by the widespread public protest against the government's legislative plan. Nor did these attacks start when the plan was unveiled or when the government began to advance it. In some cases, these attacks are a deliberate attempt to tarnish the image of commanders as authorities in the security realm in order to neutralize the public weight of the professional backing they could provide for a political agreement. Under current conditions, these unrestrained attacks are a more severe danger than ever before.

The legislation on the distribution of power between the government and the judiciary promoted by Israel's governing coalition since the start of this year has unleashed an Israeli identity war. In this battle, red lines that in the history of the state were never crossed have been crossed repeatedly – and this endangers national security.

Among the most worrying phenomena in this context are verbal attacks by government ministers, Knesset members, and other prominent supporters of the legislation against individuals serving in the IDF: against the reservists who announced that they would stop volunteering for reserve service given what they see as a threat to the democratic nature of the State of Israel, and even against those who serve at the very top of the country's security organizations. Some of the comments – like the recent attack by MK Tally Gotliv on the IDF and the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), whom she accused of “working for terrorists” – are clearly contemptible insults, designed to garner support from the most extreme fringes of the pro-legislation camp. However, the attacks against the senior security leadership are apparently motivated by other reasons – some of which are not immediately evident. Proof of this lies in the fact that they started long before this most recent storm.

In the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, and even more so following the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, extreme comments against the IDF were sounded, along with many calls for insubordination. In recent years, there were personal attacks against

senior security officials from political actors, and it is hard to ignore the possibility that these are designed solely to undermine the status of these officers as security experts and to portray them as being politically biased and even willing to neglect national security.

One prominent target for these attacks was IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, who took a clear, ethical approach to the army's handling of the so-called knife intifada. He was subjected to criticism after what became known as his "scissors speech," in which he said that he "would not want to see a soldier empty the magazine of his rifle into a girl holding a pair of scissors." Right wing politicians were quick to lambast him, with MK Uzi Dayan saying that he "had done irreparable damage to the IDF." In the aftermath of the Elor Azaria case, Eisenkot was even subjected to personal threats, along the lines of "Gadi watch out, Rabin's looking for you." Those were merely noteworthy incidents in what has become routine: demonstrations outside the homes of officers from the Central Command and the Judea and Samaria Division (Nitzan Alon, Noam Tibon, and others), written comments, and rhetoric that portray the top military leadership as having lost the fighting spirit and the desire to win.

Presumably there are several reasons for these attacks: some of the politicians from the national-religious camp feel that the growing proportion of young Israelis from their camp in combat units and among the junior officers in the IDF should be reflected in their values – as they see them – becoming more dominant. It seems that the attacks are designed to undermine the standing of the top security leadership, which the public trusts to a far greater degree than it does the politicians, since those behind the attacks worry that this trust could, from their perspective, be significant if and when it comes to a political agreement and when it comes to the Israel's day-to-day policies in the territories. These politicians see IDF and Shin Bet officers as gatekeepers, preventing a right wing regime from implementing its policies, while all the time enjoying the admiration and trust of most parts of the Israeli public.

Public opinion polls consistently show that the IDF and its officers enjoy a high level of trust from the Israeli public: 80 percent of the Jewish population awards the IDF with a very high or high grade vis-à-vis its operational capabilities ([Israel Democracy Institute, 2021](#)) and it always ranks much higher than the political leaders in terms of public trust. Those attacking IDF commanders are fully aware that officers are seen as authorities who understand security and analyze situations through professional lenses – and include some who would personally have to deal with the security ramifications of any move.

It is the military leadership that "legitimizes" momentous political moves, such as the Oslo Accords or the disengagement from the Gaza Strip. On more than one occasion and for security considerations, it has also sought to ease conditions for the Palestinian residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and to bolster cooperation with the Palestinian Authority's security apparatuses, which, according to senior officers, save Israeli lives. This position carries a lot of weight with the Israeli public.

Every day, these officers implement a policy of evacuating illegal outposts, preventing settlers from appropriating Palestinian land, thwarting terrorist activity against Palestinians, and trying to separate between the general population and the Palestinian terror organizations, in an effort to stop a widespread conflagration. These actions infuriate politicians on the extreme right. Their response is to try to delegitimize senior officers and accuse them of preventing the implementation of what they envision as a truly right wing government.

What is less visible is the possibility that senior IDF and ISA officers could give their security stamp of approval to a political agreement. The crux of the argument over the future of the territory that Israel captured in the Six Day War has, over the years, turned from ideology (the right of Jews to the land versus the aspiration for peace and the end of the occupation of another people) into a security debate, which emphasizes the very justified concern over the security ramifications of a withdrawal. Against this backdrop, the urgency of a political agreement has lessened significantly, to such an extent that it seems that most Israelis believe it is hopeless.

Those attacking the IDF may fear that if Israel elects a government that reaches a political agreement, then the support and approval of IDF commanders and other security experts would mitigate those security concerns and increase public support for a deal: if the problem is mainly one of security and the people holding the stamp of approval lend their backing to the deal, it would be very hard for opponents to drum up support for their position. The ongoing campaign to portray commanders as politically biased and lacking a cognitive desire to win is designed, in this context, to cast doubt on their motives and thereby on their standing as security experts.

These attacks reverberate, especially among supporters of the politicians making them. They contribute to the erosion of the IDF's very legitimacy, and undermine the ability of commanders to command and maintain the legitimacy needed to carry out security operations. These days, when service in the IDF and the model of service are challenged, and when service in the standing army, as well as the reserves, has become part of the battleground in the Israeli identity war – something that will have its own dire consequences in the future – these populist and political attacks on Israel's military commanders are especially dangerous.

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