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Looking for a supercop: Who can save the Israel Police from itself?

Amid scandals, the next commissioner must regain public trust, but the pool of suitable candidates for the job is slim

By [Judah Ari Gross](#) / July 9, 2015, 6:31 am

The failings of the Israel Police have been all too visible in the past two years, the final years of Yohanan Danino's term as chief: high-profile cases mishandled, allegations of racism, suspected corruption among top officers and almost too many sexual harassment accusations to count.

Some of these scandals can be explained as anomalous occurrences not necessarily indicative of an organizational issue, or — in the case of the sexual harassment allegations — a problem that affects all of Israeli society.

Others, however, are not so easily explained away.

The Tel Aviv district's near complete mishandling of the 2009 Bar Noar shooting resulted in police dropping all charges in 2013 against the suspect Hagai Felician for the murder of two people and injury of 11 more at a gay support meeting, despite Felician having confessed to the crime.

May and June of this year saw a rash of [sometimes violent protests](#) across the country by the Ethiopian-Israeli community, accusing the police of brutality and institutional racism.

And, numerous corruption charges have come out of the [ongoing Ronel Fisher case](#), which have implicated, among others, former Major General Bruno Stein for having accepted bribes from the once famous attorney. Earlier this week, Brigadier General Ephraim Bracha committed suicide in his car following accusations that he too had accepted bribes from disgraced Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto.

Of 18 brigadier generals in the Israel Police — the rank just below that of commissioner — a third have left or been fired under the shadow of scandal.

As a result, public trust levels in the police, determined by the Public Security Ministry, which have hovered between 40 to 55 percent in recent years — as opposed to between 60% to 80% just over a decade ago — now reveal a serious problem with the Israeli police force and how it is perceived by the people they are serving.

Danino left his post earlier this month, and Deputy Police Commissioner Bentzi Sau has taken over for now, but a full-time replacement has yet to be appointed. Unless a suitable candidate is found before then, Sau will serve as the acting chief of police until September 1.

“Whoever comes into that position needs to not only manage the organization, but needs to bring about a revolution,” **Meir Elran**, a senior researcher at the **Institute for National Security Studies**, a think tank affiliated with Tel Aviv University, told the Times of Israel Tuesday.

The issue, **Elran** explained, is one of self-awareness and identity. “It’s a problem of organizational culture,” he said. “They have a problem understanding their role and how they need to behave.”

That misunderstanding, he continued, especially in the upper echelons of the Israel Police, causes a breakdown in the mutual trust between police and the public.

In order to address the issues, **Elran** said, “We need to have a revolution.”

‘The revolution has already begun’

Dr. David Weisburd, who won the Israel Prize this year for his criminological research work, agreed that the Israel Police is in need of a “culture change,” but said some of the reforms the public has been clamoring for have been in effect for over a year.

“The revolution has already begun,” said Weisburd, a professor at Hebrew University. “No one’s aware of it.”

The Israel Police has put more emphasis on intensive criminological studies and the effective precedents set by police forces around the world, he said, citing a recent random, controlled study to identify crime hotspots and to make policing in those areas more effective.

Weisburd, in fact, pointed to the recent scandals as proof of sorts of these changes.

Last summer, following the abduction and killing of three Israeli teenagers — Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Fraenkel and Gil-ad Shaer — by Palestinians near the settlement of Alon Shvut, the police’s Judea and Samaria Division was revealed to have bungled the handling of one of the victim’s phone calls to police, which officers at the time had dismissed as a prank.

Danino, the police chief, dismissed four officers from the division, including two high-ranking officers, and cited the incident as a “black mark” in the official record of other officers involved in the case.

“In many police forces around the world, whenever they get attacked, they circle up the wagons and they stand hard,” Weisburd said, referring to the phenomenon of the “blue wall of silence,” an unwritten rule in police departments to not report other officers’ misconduct.

These small initial changes may be encouraging signs for the reformation of the police, but the bulk of the work to rebuild the public's belief in its law enforcement officers is yet to be done.

Weisburd compared the improvements the police have made — principally the increased reliance on more scientific policing — to a spark or an ember.

“It can be put out; it's not yet a bonfire within the police,” Weisburd explained.

Though Weisburd claimed the revolution has begun, there is a reason why the population has yet to notice. Major steps will need to be taken by the future chief of police in order to repair the public's attitudes.

“The police have to be less closed,” Weisburd said. “They have to start thinking of themselves as an organization that provides a service to the public.”

In addition to removing some of the tarnish from the Israel Police's name, better cooperation with the public should also result in a lower crime rate. “Most crimes are solved by the public, not by the police,” Weisburd explained.

To accomplish this, [Elran](#) maintained the need for strict, clear standards and critical civilian oversight of the department — and its leadership — over the next five years.

“People who don't live up to those standards,” [Elran](#) said, “you need to say to them, ‘Thank you very much,’ and send them home.”

Though civilian oversight is frequently resented by police departments, [Elran](#) said, “It is essential at this time.”

Weisburd, too, said that a certain type of civilian oversight — a government committee that works with police, for instance — could be a step in the right direction. Still, he stressed the need to find evidence to support the idea that added oversight would have the desired effect, before making so dramatic a change.

In search of a new commissioner

[Elran](#), though reluctant to name any particular candidate for Israel Police chief, was adamant that Danino's replacement had to come from within the police ranks.

Thus far, Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan has remained mum on who the new police chief will be.

In recent months the idea that an IDF general could take over command of the Israel Police has been discussed by several newspaper commentators, especially when news broke that Southern Command head Major General Sami Turgeman was being considered by Erdan for the position.

There is also precedent in Israel for moving ex-IDF generals into new organizations. Of the 11 heads of the Mossad spy agency, five have been former IDF generals, as opposed to just six who were career agents in the service.

But in this case, [Elran](#) — whose research focuses on society and national security — said the costs of bringing in an outsider outweigh the benefits.

Though an ex-IDF general could act in the capacity of a drill sergeant, whipping the police into shape, he argued, the amount of time it would take for him to learn the inner workings and idiosyncrasies of the Israel Police, and the resistance such a candidate might face from existing commanders, would hinder his ability to operate.

“It would be very difficult,” he explained. “It’s not impossible, but it would be very difficult.”

But pulling a candidate from within the police, however, would also not be an easy task. At least six members of the senior command have either left or been kicked out of their positions amid sexual harassment and corruption scandals over the past two years.

To widen the pool of potential candidates, [Elran](#) offered, the public security minister could look not just for current officers, but even those who left the police in recent years.

[Elran](#) pointed to former chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi as an example of such a move. Ashkenazi left the army in 2005, only to return in 2007 to lead the outfit.

Whoever heads the Israel Police, Weisburd said, will have to ramp up the changes to the police culture.

“There’s something going on,” he said. “If it continues, many of the things we want from the police will happen, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.”

But, he warned, “A new chief of police, who goes in a different direction, could shut it down in a minute. And that’s why who the next chief of police will be is so important.”

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