



# A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED: THE ISRAELI NATIONAL SECURITY CONSTELLATION AND ITS EFFECT ON POLICYMAKING



THE PHILADELPHIA PAPERS, No. 17  
JOSHUA KRASNA

FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
FEBRUARY 2018



All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

© 2018 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

COVER: Israeli Cabinet Members visit the Golan Heights, February 2018 (Kobi Gideon, Government Press Office of Israel)



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

---

## MISSION

The Foreign Policy Research Institute is dedicated to bringing the insights of scholarship to bear on the foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. It seeks to educate the public, teach teachers, train students, and offer ideas to advance U.S. national interests based on a nonpartisan, geopolitical perspective that illuminates contemporary international affairs through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

**EDUCATING THE AMERICAN PUBLIC:** FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is paramount for the U.S. to conduct a coherent foreign policy. Today, we live in a world of unprecedented complexity and ever-changing threats, and as we make decisions regarding the nation's foreign policy, the stakes could not be higher. FPRI offers insights to help the public understand this volatile world by publishing research, hosting conferences, and holding dozens of public events and lectures each year.

**PREPARING TEACHERS:** Unique among think tanks, FPRI offers professional development for high school teachers through its Madeleine and W.W. Keen Butcher History Institute, a series of intensive weekend-long conferences on selected topics in U.S. and world history and international relations. These nationally known programs equip educators to bring lessons of a new richness to students across the nation.

**TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION:** At FPRI, we are proud to have played a role in providing students – whether in high school, college, or graduate school – with a start in the fields of international relations, policy analysis, and public service. Summer interns – and interns throughout the year – gain experience in research, editing, writing, public speaking, and critical thinking.

**OFFERING IDEAS:** We count among our ranks over 120 affiliated scholars located throughout the nation and the world. They are open-minded, ruthlessly honest, and proudly independent. In the past year, they have appeared in well over 100 different media venues- locally, nationally and internationally.





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

vii	GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS
1	INTRODUCTION
3	THE GOVERNMENT
5	THE PRIME MINISTER
7	THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE
12	THE SECURITY CABINET
16	THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE
20	THE ISRAELI DEFENSE FORCES
29	THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
35	THE SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE SERVICES
38	THE NATIONAL SECURITY STAFF
44	THE "MINI MINISTRIES"
48	THE KNESSET FOREIGN AND DEFENSE COMMITTEE
52	EXTERNAL ACTORS
57	CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---



**Joshua Krasna**, a 2017-2018 Robert A. Fox Fellow in the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Program on the Middle East, is an analyst specializing in Middle East political and regional developments as well as in international strategic issues. He recently retired after 30 years of government and diplomatic service in Israel. His last assignment before retirement was as an Instructor at Israel's senior professional military education school the Israel National Defense College. He has published several articles in scholarly journals, and is proficient in Hebrew and Arabic. Dr. Krasna holds a PhD from the Bar Ilan University and is a graduate of Columbia University and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

---

AGAT	IDF Planning Directorate
AMAN	IDF Intelligence Directorate
CGS	Chief of General Staff of the IDF
DG	Director General (Highest Ranking Civil Servant in a Ministry)
DMI	Directorate of Military Intelligence = AMAN
FADC	Foreign and Defense Committee of the Knesset
IAF	Israeli Air Force
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
INSS	Institute of National Security Studies
ISA	Israel Security Agency = Shabak
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MK	Member of Knesset
MOD	Ministry of Defense
NSA	National Security Advisor
NSS	National Security Staff
PM	Prime Minister
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
Shabak	Israel Security Agency = ISA



A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED:  
THE ISRAELI NATIONAL SECURITY CONSTELLATION AND  
ITS EFFECT ON POLICYMAKING

## INTRODUCTION

---

Israel commands inordinate attention—relative to its size—in international media and fora and in the study of international and Middle Eastern politics. Much ink has been spilled on Israeli defense and foreign policy outputs. Much less has been spilled on how the Israeli national security constellation is actually structured and how it functions, as well as how these factors affect the nature and quality of decisions and policies produced.

For a country which is ostensibly so familiar to Western experts, Israel's policy-making structures and processes are surprisingly unclear. While many of the formal components of a national security apparatus exist—Security Cabinet, National Security Advisor and Staff, Defense Ministry, Foreign Ministry, intelligence and security services, and even Strategic Affairs and Intelligence Ministries—the whole can actually be less than the sum of its parts. Understanding of the Israeli system is lacking both abroad and within Israel; like many things, people think they know more about it than they do. Relations between Israel and the United States, in particular, have entered a phase

where the two sides need to understand each other more intimately and not just assume they know each other “like brothers.” The systems are superficially alike, but are in fact very different, and not only because of the different political systems. The Ministry of Defense sounds like the Department of Defense, the Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces sounds like the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the National Security Staff sounds like the National Security Council. The Pol-Mil Division at the Ministry of Defense sounds like it should be similar in form and function to the Office of the Undersecretary for Policy in the Pentagon, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems like the State Department, and the Planning Directorate of the General Staff even calls itself J5. But even the words “Government” and “Cabinet” mean different things in the two systems.

What this paper sets out to do is help those who interact with official Israeli interlocutors, those who simply want more insight into Israeli national security policy-making, and those who wish to understand the detailed working and the organizational politics within the Israeli system. The same questions are



always crucial in understanding, engaging, or influencing another complex actor: Who are the players? What does each player want: what are their interests, agendas, and priorities? What assets (positive and negative) and influence do they possess? What are the relationships and balance of forces among them? Who is important?

There are many players in the Israeli system, often with overlapping mandates. Official titles and definitions are often a poor guide to the actual significance of an individual or organizational actor. A European ambassador in Israel was quoted in 2015 as saying: “There is a lot of confusion over who we are supposed to work with in this government. There are too many players and too many sensitivities.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this study is to describe and diagnose carefully the Israeli national security establishment as it is now. It is not to prescribe cures for real or imagined ills: it is not clear that the system can, or should be, “fixed.” Nevertheless, a deep understanding of the structure and process is important in and of itself in order to understand what can and cannot be expected from it. This study also serves as a map for insiders

and outsiders alike on who the significant actors are and how the system can be negotiated and “played” in order to get things done. In Morton Halperin’s seminal work, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, he noted that “bureaucrats can make use of the skills of their trade in increasing their influence. . . . Staff skill is in part a matter of knowledge, of ‘understanding’ in detail how the system works.”<sup>2</sup> It is also important to identify the key aspects of political, strategic, and bureaucratic culture which shape the system, as well as the most significant pathologies and bottlenecks which actually may be susceptible to amelioration.

The paper will introduce and examine, in turn, each of the bureaucratic players in the Israeli national security constellation, paying attention to its relative power and influence and its interactions with other players. It will then make some general observations and conclusions regarding the Israeli national security system.<sup>3</sup>

---

## Endnotes

1 Itamar Eichner, “With Foreign Ministry Stripped of Powers, Diplomats Fear for Israel’s Standing,” *Ynet.news.com*, May 27, 2015.

2 Morton H. Halperin and Priscilla A. Clapp with Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, Second Edition (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2006), p. 235.

3 In writing this paper, I have relied mostly on insights gleaned from my 30 years of experience in the Israeli national security establishment, as well as on official reports, interviews, press reports, and the few extant academic analyses.

# THE GOVERNMENT

---

**U**nder the Israeli electoral system, after parliamentary elections, the President (a mostly ceremonial position) asks the heads of the various parties elected to the new Knesset to recommend a Prime Minister to form a governing coalition which includes at least 61 of the 120 elected Members of Knesset. Once it is clear that parties comprising a majority of the Knesset recommend an individual—almost always the head of the largest party—the President asks that individual to form a governing coalition. If he is not able to do so within 42 days, the President may ask the head of another party list. Once the coalition is formed, the Prime Minister divides the various

government ministries between his party and the various coalition parties. Each party receives a number of portfolios according to its negotiating power; parties often demand specific portfolios relevant to their base. Several portfolios are considered “senior” and especially desirable and usually go to the heads of the coalition parties or of the Prime Minister’s own party: Defense, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Interior and Education. The Prime Minister appoints ministers, and he may dismiss them, though this often will cause a crisis in the coalition: when the Prime Minister no longer has the support of 61 MKs, the government falls. The group of ministers, headed by the Prime Minister, is the Government.



*The Cabinet Room in the Prime Minister's Office (GPO)*

In defense issues, the supreme command in Israel is the Government in its entirety; there have been as few as fourteen and as many as thirty ministers in Israel's governments. The Minister of Defense is in charge of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), on behalf of the Government. The Prime Minister (PM) has no statutory authority over the IDF, apart from their membership in the Government.

The Government in its entirety rarely carries out substantive discussions of issues - among other reasons, it is too large a venue - which are often delegated to ministerial committees composed of a sub-set of Government ministers, or carried out directly by the relevant ministers and the PM. The Cabinet, in the Israeli context, is a smaller group of ministers—formally, not more than half of the members of the Government<sup>1</sup>—who directly

deal with national security issues. It is the highest decision-making body in national security affairs, and its decisions have the status of government decisions. Until 2001, there was no legal basis for a Cabinet. Such fora did exist in various forms, but ad hoc by the decision of the PM, and without legal standing. In that year, the Basic Law: the Government<sup>2</sup> was amended to establish the Ministerial Committee for National Security, commonly known as the Security Cabinet or Cabinet. It includes *ex officio* the PM, the Vice Prime Minister if there is one (the position was last filled in 2006-2008), the Defense Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Finance Minister, the Justice Minister, and the Minister for Internal Security; other members are appointed by the PM. The Cabinet will be addressed later in this study.

---

#### Endnotes

1 It is often larger than the prescribed half of government ministers, due to the addition of non-voting "associate members."

2 Israel has no written constitution, but rather a series of Basic Laws.



## THE PRIME MINISTER

---

Many scholars of Israeli politics write that the Prime Minister of Israel is only “first among equals.” Their statutory authority is highly circumscribed, and their actual power and true ability to lead—even more than in other democracies—is primarily a function of the PM’s personality, political skills, coalition exigencies, and aptitude in wielding the prestige of office to generate support for preferred policies. Charles Freilich, a former Deputy National Security Advisor, speaks of the “chronic political instability” and rapid coalition turnover in Israel, the short terms of ministers, PMs and cabinets, and “the weakness of the [PM]’s office . . . which has

. . . had an increasingly detrimental impact on the [PM]’s ability to govern on a day-to-day basis, let alone chart a long-term course.”<sup>1</sup> This analysis has some truth and is part of the wide and quite heated discourse in Israel on “decreased governability.”

Israel is indeed a parliamentary democracy, and its Prime Ministers must, as noted, form and maintain multi-party coalitions to rule. But while formally the Government is the sovereign and the PM is merely first among equals and weak in law, the PM has always been—and even more in the past quarter century—the most significant figure in all fields in which he chooses to be involved,



*PM Benjamin Netanyahu with Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon, CGS Gadi Eizenkot, and Chief of Southern Command (Haim Zach, GPO)*

but especially in national security and foreign policy. In these spheres, he is the chief executive, with sway and actual, as opposed to formal, power more commonly found in presidential systems. While there have been numerous significant actions and crises in the past 25 years in Israel's strategic affairs,<sup>2</sup> they have all been managed by the PM and a small group of ministers and/or advisors, with the Government—and often the Security Cabinet—either compartmentalized or serving as a rubber stamp.

Despite the PM's role as the most important decision maker in Israel, he is the official who, until recently, most lacked the formal tools and structures to analyze, plan, and manage

the policy process. In the more distant past, many PMs have also been Defense Minister and have used the defense establishment as their staff in both roles. But a new norm has evolved over the past 20 years, of separation of these two functions.

---

#### Endnotes

1 Charles D. Freilich, *Zion's Dilemmas: How Israel Makes National Security Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 18-19, 43-45.

2 e.g., the Oslo Accords, the withdrawal from Southern Lebanon, Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank, the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the attack on the Syrian reactor, the Second Lebanon War, numerous secret negotiations with Syria and regarding POWs and MIAs, the diplomatic and clandestine struggle against the Iranian nuclear program, numerous military engagements with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.



## THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE

**P**rime Ministers have always made use of their executive office and staff, known as “the Aquarium” for its glassed-in premises inside the Prime Minister’s Office building in Jerusalem. This office has burgeoned significantly as a result of the strengthening of the Prime Ministership. This has enabled PMs often to circumvent established ministries—most notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—and to carry out closely controlled policy initiatives.

The relationships within the Aquarium are characterized as a “Byzantine court,” with a large degree of overlap, ambiguity, backbiting, and bureaucratic striving. Players’ actual significance for policy is predominantly a function of their closeness to the PM and liable to change over time. Former officials claim that the physical distance of a senior official from the PM’s personal office within the Aquarium is an indicator of their influence and status.

The most formalized and oldest of the administrative structures at the bidding of the PM is the Prime Minister’s Office.<sup>1</sup> The PMO is a government ministry, headed by the PM and managed by a Director General. It includes several divisions and departments, which either help administer the ministry and the PM’s executive office or carry out government-wide activity; for instance, it

includes the National Cyber Staff and the National Agency for Cyber Defense. The DG of the PMO generally deals with coordinating and synthesizing domestic and economic issues across government ministries and ensuring the PM’s vision is implemented; he is described often as the “Director General of the [Ministry] Director Generals.”<sup>2</sup>

The DG of the PMO is distinct from the PM’s Chief of Staff, a position which has been added in recent years, with the increasing Americanization and “Presidentialization” of the PM’s staff structure and fulfills a function similar to those of his counterparts in other Western countries. The introduction of the Chief of Staff has seemed to reduce the significance of the Chief of Bureau, who historically runs the PM’s executive office and manages his schedule and is closer perhaps to an aide-de-camp.<sup>3</sup>

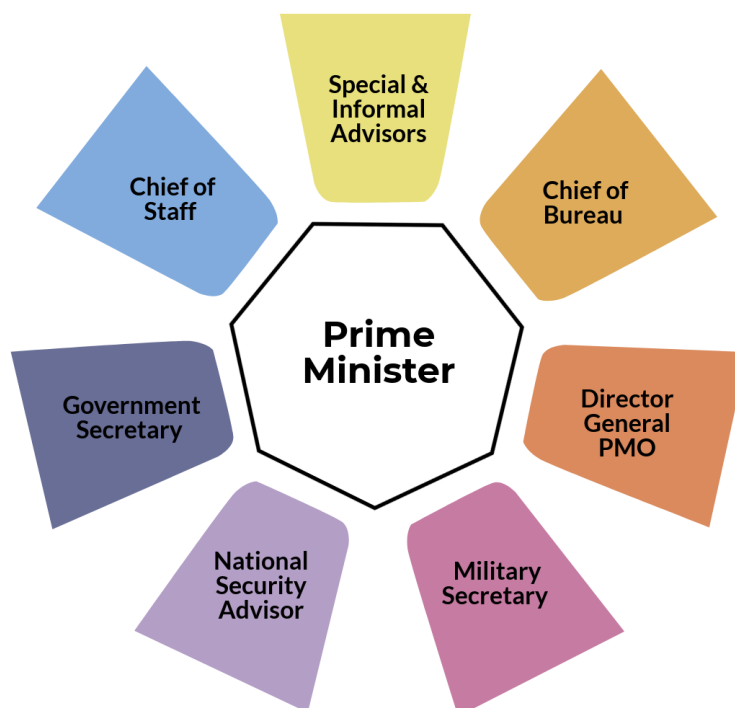


*PM Netanyahu with his National Security Advisor, MG (ret) Yaakov Amidror, and his Foreign Policy Advisor, Ron Dermer. (GPO)*

Another key function in the PMO is that of the Government Secretary. This individual, who heads the Government Secretariat, prepares all meetings of the Government and of its Ministerial Committees, is responsible for relations between the Government and the Knesset, follows up on the implementation of Government decisions, and performs any other duties as directed by the PM. From roughly 1980 to 2000, this position—which is considered a position of trust and usually manned by someone close to the PM politically and personally—was considered extremely influential and a “step up” for rising political stars.

Another significant and longstanding functionary in the executive office is the PM’s Military Secretary. This is an acting service general who is a member of the General Staff; the current Chief of General Staff (CGS) served in this position between 1999-2001. The Military Secretary serves as the liaison between the PM and the military command, but also is the conduit to the PM of intelligence and operational information from the military and the security services and advises the PM on defense and security matters. He is one of the key gatekeepers within the national security system, and all reports and paperwork on intelligence and

FIGURE 1: POWER CENTERS WITHIN THE PM’S OFFICE



*PM Ariel Sharon visiting the ranch of President George W. Bush (driving). Behind Sharon is his special advisor, Dov Weissglas. (GPO)*



security issues for the PM go through him. However, despite the fact that a great deal of information flows through the Military Secretary, he has a very small staff and is not an intelligence or operational authority which has to bear the responsibility for assessments. In the past, this officer has often served as a key member of the PM's policy team, and in different periods before the establishment of the position of National Security Advisor, fulfilled this function de facto. The dual subordination to the CGS and the PM is problematic, to say the least.<sup>4</sup> The recent downgrading of the position's rank to Brigadier General may well indicate a reduction of the influence of this individual, as well as of his independence vis-à-vis the General Staff and the Defense Minister.

Since the establishment of the National Security Staff headed by the National Security Advisor, the NSA has been a key component of the PM's executive staff, and sits in the Aquarium close to the PM's private office.<sup>5</sup> The PM also usually has a Foreign

Policy Advisor, who was usually a seconded Foreign Service Officer. The significance of this position seems to have declined with the absorption of most of its previous functions into that of the NSA.

The mandate of these executive officials<sup>6</sup> to deal in national security and foreign policy matters is a function of the wishes of the PM. Their formal titles are an imperfect guide to their actual functions and influence. This often leads to a situation described as "several players on the same square."<sup>7</sup> Some examples:

- PM Ehud Barak's chief negotiators with the Palestinians in 1999-2000 leading up to the failed Camp David II summit were his bureau chief, Gilad Sher, and his Internal Security Minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami
- One of PM Ariel Sharon's key operatives in the Gaza withdrawal and diplomatic contacts with the United States was Dov Weissglas, who was Sharon's long-time personal lawyer. He served from 2002 to 2004 as Sharon's Chief of Bureau and later as a Special Advisor to Sharon and to Ehud Olmert.
- The 2008 abortive secret peace negotiations with Syria in Istanbul were carried out by Yoram Turbowicz, who was PM Olmert's Chief of Staff, and Shalom Tourjeman, who was his foreign policy advisor and a career diplomat.

Apart from the abovementioned use

of members of their executive staff for sensitive diplomatic missions—and the use of the Mossad for this purpose, which will be addressed later—PMs have made extensive, often controversial, use of personal, nongovernmental emissaries (“private citizens”) as plenipotentiaries for such purposes. Some examples:

- The extensive use PM Benjamin Netanyahu from his first term in 1996 until this year of Yitzchak Molcho, a prominent Israeli lawyer who is not a government employee, for negotiations with the Palestinians and Arab states
- The use by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and PM Yitzhak Rabin of Israeli academic Ron Pundak to carry out secret pre-negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization leading to the Oslo Accords (1993-1994). Pundak also served later as a member of the official negotiating team.
- PM Rabin’s use of former senior Israel Security Agency officer Yossi Ginossar as his go-between with Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization.
- PM Netanyahu’s use of American billionaire Ron Lauder in 1998 to negotiate with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad on possible diplomatic solutions to the Golan Heights issue. It is important to note that Israeli leaders have traditionally made use of non-Israeli Jewish leaders and organizations as intermediaries with

both friendly and hostile governments.

- PM Sharon’s use of his son Omri as his personal emissary to the Palestinian leadership. His other son, Gilad, was also a close adviser.
- PM Netanyahu’s use of lawyer and businessman and former Director General of the Foreign Ministry, Joseph Ciechanover, in the negotiations to restore Israeli-Turkish relations after the Marmara episode.

As will be discussed later, several influential organizations, such as the Mossad foreign intelligence service and the Israel Security Agency (Shabak), are subordinate directly to the PM. This structure gives the PM unique influence in these areas, and PMs often make use of these organizations’ discreet and secretive nature—their activity is not generally discussed in the Government or the Cabinet—to help make and conduct policy in the most pressing and important issues of Israeli national security.

---

## Endnotes

1 Or “Ministry,” the words in Hebrew are the same.

2 Former Deputy Foreign Minister Yehuda Ben Meir notes that in the ‘60s through the ‘80s (long before the creation of the National Security Staff), some of the DGs of the PMO functioned to a large degree as national security advisors. Yehuda Ben-Meir, *National Security Decision-making: The Israeli Case* (Boulder: Westview, 1986), p. 99.

3 One interesting characteristic of the Israeli system—though it is not confined by any means to Israel—is that functions and even organizations which have become irrelevant or less relevant, are often retained within the system, rather than eliminated.

4 Amos Yadlin, *Professional Knowledge in the Security Cabinet: The Need to Enhance It, and the Way to Do So*, INSS Insight no. 825, May 31, 2016.

5 Arad describes his efforts to move the NSA’s office into the Aquarium, understanding that the physical geography of power translates into actual influence: “From the moment that the NSA took his place in the ‘Aquarium’ and assumed the functions and the authorities of the foreign policy advisors [to the PM], not budging from the PM’s proximity, he became a real National Security Advisor.” Uzi Arad and Limor Ben-Har, *NSC: The Struggle to Create and Transform the National Security Council* (Tel Aviv: Kinneret, Zmora, Bitan, 2016) [in Hebrew], p. 202. The first NSAs sat in a suburb of Tel Aviv, far from the Defense Ministry and even farther from the PM’s office and other government ministries in Jerusalem. Arad’s immediate predecessors, while sitting in the PMO building in Jerusalem, sat on another floor, emblematic of their distance from actual influence.

6 In addition, there is today also a Deputy Minister in the PMO for Foreign Policy (Michael Oren, a former academic and Ambassador to the United States, who is an MK from the Kulanu Party, a coalition partner), whose precise role is unclear (there is also a Deputy Foreign Minister). Deputy Ministers are another interesting Israeli phenomenon: by law, they must be MKs, and with several notable exceptions, have not contributed much to the Foreign and Defense Ministries, where they have often served.

7 Arad and Ben-Har, p. 114. Halperin aptly describes the similar situation in the American system, showing that this phenomenon is not unique to Israel:

The determination of who is a senior participant and what rules they observe depends heavily on the inclination of the president. Some participants will be senior, regardless of their formal position, because of their personal standing in the political or intellectual community. . . . In other cases, participants carry weight (or indeed figure in the making of foreign policy at all) because of personal relations with the president (p. 113).



# THE SECURITY CABINET

---

Many observers note the practical, as opposed to the formal, irrelevance of the Government and the Cabinet to policy- and decision-making. They note that the Cabinet is of very limited functionality due to its unwieldy size—usually about a dozen members—gaps in national security expertise among its members, and its lack of a dedicated professional staff as well as its “leaky” nature. The Security Cabinet often contains members whose ministries have no direct role in national security and have no particular expertise in such issues, but whose membership reflects the exigencies of building a coalition government since membership in this forum confers prestige and status and serves therefore as a coalition-building sweetener. Unlike in presidential systems, PMs do not choose many of their ministers, but rather assign portfolios to coalition partner parties and do not necessarily know them well or trust them.

Member of Knesset Ofer Shelah notes that since Cabinet members lack the requisite knowledge, are preoccupied with the matters of their own ministries, and possess no designated national security staff of their own, they are almost incapable of alternative and unconventional thinking to contrast the options presented to them by

the Prime and Defense Ministers.<sup>1</sup> Cabinet meetings are not really discussions: much of the time is spent on intelligence and other presentations.<sup>2</sup> The ministers are then, it is reported, presented options—almost exclusively by men in uniform, with the Chief of General Staff and head of Defense Intelligence almost always participating—for operational rather than strategic decisions. These decisions usually are under time pressure and are ones which they can either approve or reject (which rarely happens). In this way, they are in fact a rubber stamp to decisions already “cooked” by the Defense Minister and PM because “the last thing [PM]s usually want is a substantive cabinet discussion of objectives and options.” One former Cabinet member explained, “The power of the PM is enormous, because he sets the agenda of meetings and he sums



*Lighting of Hanukkah candles after a cabinet meeting (1953) with David ben Gurion and Golda Meir. (GPO)*

them up.”<sup>3</sup>

Another example of Cabinet members not participating in national security issues relates to IDF exercises. Former senior military officers note that Cabinet members, and even the Prime Minister, don't participate in IDF exercises, including on the General Staff level, even when asked to play the political level and provide the strategy guidance. In the end, the exercising HQ needs to write guidance for itself or uses former politicians. One former general opined, “They are not interested: it is an activity which has no electors or political benefit. . . . A battalion commander prepares his battalion for war, a brigade commander, his brigade. The PM should be preparing his Cabinet, and making sure that when the time comes, they will be ready to fulfill their designated function.”<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that the State Comptroller's Report on the 2014 Gaza campaign found that “even Cabinet Ministers do not know if the Cabinet is a decision-making or consultative body, what issues require decision in the Cabinet, and under what conditions is it required to assemble the Cabinet.”<sup>5</sup>

One former National Security Advisor interviewed for this study disagreed with this analysis. In his view, Cabinet members who are interested in being informed have access to all the information they require, especially after a recent reform involved the appointment of referents for the ministers in the NSS. Even before that, they could

ask relevant military, security, and foreign policy officials for briefings and information: “There is water in the trough; they need to go drink it.” He notes that many of the Cabinet members are quite busy with their own ministries, may have no knowledge in security and foreign affairs, or are not very inclined to invest effort in their Cabinet membership. If they do not invest time and effort in educating themselves when possible, they will lack the ability to catch up in times of crisis, and their ability to judge and influence events will be much diminished.<sup>6</sup> Two former ministers agreed with this characterization. They noted that in times of normal activity they were always able to fully inform themselves about issues which interested and concerned them. They were never prevented from approaching the various organizations and receiving information and briefings, so that in times of crisis, they were well informed and able to participate effectively in discussions.<sup>7</sup>

In practice, the true locus of decision-making and crisis management has been smaller groups of ministers and advisors convened by the PM as more effective and efficient alternatives, known in Israeli parlance as “kitchens” and “kitchenettes,”<sup>8</sup> but which

***The PM prefers to make his mistakes, to air his dilemmas and uncertainties, or to raise and shoot down ideas and options in a small forum, characterized by a high degree of trust.***

have no statutory standing and are not supported by staff work or by systematic policy planning processes. According to opponents of this practice, decisions are made by the Prime and Defense Ministers and small coterie of political allies, advisors (often with no official standing), and officers/officials in an opaque and informal manner, without adequate documentation.

The use of “kitchens” and sub-Cabinet groupings as the forum for decision-making, and the marginalization and ritualization of the full Government and Cabinet, are an illustration of the well-known tendency of

large groupings to hive off smaller, closer-knit groupings, who enjoy the Chief Executive’s trust, to carry out the ongoing work of national security.<sup>9</sup> One former NSA notes that the PM prefers to make his mistakes, to air his dilemmas and uncertainties, or to raise and shoot down ideas and options in a small forum, characterized by a high degree of trust. Two former ministers who were members of the most influential of these small ministerial fora in the past decade, as well as a former NSA, praised the professional and collegial level achieved in it. They noted that political and personal agendas and conflicts were put aside, though none were particularly

FIGURE 2: CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE IN THE ISRAELI POLITICAL SYSTEM

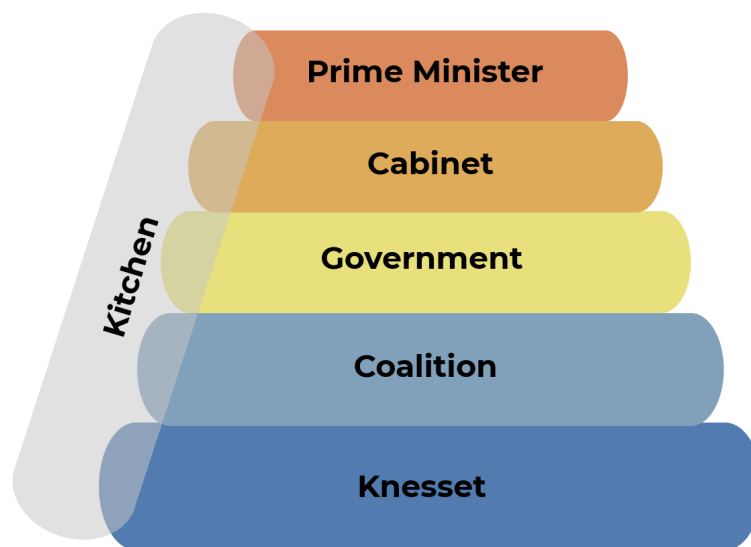


Figure 2: Graphic depiction of the Israeli political system. Informal “kitchens” used by Prime Ministers for consultation and decision-making, often include figures outside the Cabinet, the Government, and even the political system.

close to the PM who headed the forum, and some of the members of the forum were his political rivals. The ministers both achieved a high level of competence and expertise in the relevant issues and carried out deep and informed discussions within the forum, which influenced and informed the PM's decisions. One of them explained that the

key was absolute trust between the PM and forum: "There were never any leaks, and the PM knew no one would make use of what they knew against him. It was a team which worked together well, with no ego."<sup>10</sup>

---

## Endnotes

1 Ofer Shelah, *Dare to Win: A Security Policy for Israel* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2015), p. 253.

2 It is worth noting that Cabinet meetings are very large affairs, with one commission noting the presence of 29 participants from the working, as opposed to ministerial, level. *Report of the Committee on the Functioning of the Politico-Security Cabinet* [the Amidror Committee], December 2016 [in Hebrew].

3 Personal interview with the author, December 2017.

4 Personal interview with the author, January 2018.

5 *State Comptroller's Report on the 2014 Gaza campaign*, State Comptroller's Office, 2017.

6 The NSS tried to set up a study program in 2015 for new cabinet members, but participation was sparse. Yadlin, *Professional Knowledge*.

7 Personal interviews with the author, December 2017.

8 The term originated during the tenure of PM Golda Meir, who used to hold the meetings of her small decision-making group of ministers, officials, and officers in her home and serve home-baked cakes. In Sharon's terms, his informal decision-making group met at his farm and was known as the Farm Forum. In Netanyahu's second government (2009-2013), national security issues, especially Iran, were addressed by the "Quintet," which morphed into the "Octet." In addition to its original members—Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak (a former CGS), Minister without Portfolio Benny Begin, Minister for Intelligence Matters and the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission Dan Meridor, and Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Yaalon (another former CGS)—, it included Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Interior Minister Eli Yishai, and Finance Minister Yuval Steinetz; in its final year, it also included Home Front Defense Minister Avi Dichter, former head of the Shabak.

9 Halperin notes (p. 131) that American presidents often form informal groups of top advisers to handle particular issues. Kennedy's EXCOM is perhaps the best example, but Halperin notes that many American presidents have handled sensitive issues in an inner circle, and not in the NSC plenum. He quotes George H.W. Bush's NSA Brent Scowcroft who noted that "it was becoming apparent to me that a full-blown NSC gathering was not always the place for a no-holds-barred discussion among the President's top advisors. . . . This marked the beginning of a new pattern for top-level meetings (the 'core group') during the rest of the Administration. While we continued to hold formal NSC meetings, an informal group became the rule rather than the exception for practical decisionmaking."

10 One of the former ministers noted that for such a "kitchen" to be effective, it needs "a rare combination of talented people in the right ages, flexible and capable of learning, with knowledge and experience, loyal and collegial." Personal interviews with the author, December 2017.

# THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE

---

It may come as a surprise that the Ministry of Defense is not one of the main players in the Israeli national security constellation. This is partially due to the fact that the Minister of Defense, who does serve a very significant role in the process and is in fact second in influence after the PM, exercises his authorities through two channels: he is the Minister exercising authority over the Israel Defense Forces on behalf of the government and therefore works intimately with the General Staff and its organs, and he also heads the civilian MOD, through its Director General. These channels afford the Defense Minister—usually the second most powerful politician and decision-maker in Israel—tremendous staff power and capability, unparalleled by any other bureaucratic player. It has been the Defense Ministers over the years, with the notable exception of Moshe Arens, who have opposed the creation of the NSS, and after its existence was a fact, strived to marginalize it in order to prevent a weakening of the primacy of the defense establishment.

This raises an interesting characteristic of Israeli national security policy-making: its geographical duality. The PMO, the NSS, the Foreign Ministry, and the Knesset are in Jerusalem, the seat of power. But most of the security establishment—the MOD, the

General Staff, and the security services—are located an hour away in the Tel Aviv area. This physical distance creates a psychological disconnect and a reality of two competing power foci as well as affecting the nature and flow of policy-making and impairing coordination and collaboration.

The civilian MOD deals with issues regarding procurement, infrastructure, budgeting, personnel, research and development, veterans' affairs, military industry, and exports. The "policy shop" which deals with strategic or politico-military issues is small and relatively new. Ministers of Defense throughout Israel's history have traditionally had their staff work on national security and strategic issues carried out by the IDF and/or their immediate staff or close advisors. This is not so surprising since nine of the sixteen men who have served as Defense



*Ministry of Defense and General Staff Building (GPO)*



Minister—for 43 out of the 69 years of Israel's existence—were former generals.

Defense Ministers are characterized by a tendency—especially by those former generals who served in the position—to see their job as a “super-Chief of Staff,” who micromanages the IDF. In Shelah's view, the Minister and his Ministry serve—and see their role—as the representative and the advocate of the IDF within the Government, rather than the opposite. Shelah calls for the strengthening of the Minister's civilian staff, so the Minister does not have to depend solely on the military's inputs in making decisions; “in the bottom line, the Minister of Defense receives no input from an influential civilian surrounding, not from within his ministry and not from outside it.”<sup>1</sup>

There are two organs within the civilian MOD who deal with strategic policy issues. These are the Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs. The former is the older of the two, and it has a more defined and formalized sphere of responsibility. It is responsible for administering those West Bank areas under Israeli control and for day-to-day civilian and security liaison and coordination with the Palestinian Authority and international organizations functioning in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>2</sup> The COGAT, an active service Major General, is “double-hatted:” he is a member of the IDF General Staff, and is also a Unit Chief in the MOD and reports directly to the Minister. The COGAT has a very significant

*PM Netanyahu at a briefing near the Gaza strip. He is joined by Defense Minister Ehad Barak, Commander of Southern Command, and the head of Shabak.(GPO)*



voice in determining and implementing government policy regarding the PA and especially the Palestinian population living in the West Bank. This is usually expressed as a moderating influence promoting the quality of life and economic development of the inhabitants and alleviating policy initiatives which are punitive—intentionally or unintentionally—in their effect on the population or weaken the PA. In addition, the fact that a major component of Israeli security policy in the West Bank is the use of Palestinian security forces to thwart and deter terrorist activity makes the COGAT a significant player in national security policy regarding the West Bank. The COGAT has throughout its existence been defined by a blurring of boundaries between civilian and military, as a military organization which fulfills fundamentally civilian functions, often using civilian means and personnel.<sup>3</sup>

In 2003, the Directorate of Political-Security Affairs was set up, under Major General (ret.) Amos Gilad, formerly Chief of the Intelligence Directorate's Research Department and COGAT. The head of the Directorate is

subordinate to the DG of the MOD and is responsible for:

- Identifying and analyzing security-political risks and opportunities in the regional and international arenas.
- Formulating position papers and policy recommendations for the defense establishment's policy on strategic and security issues with a regional and international context, and regarding developments in the various arenas.
- Planning policy and strategy: Palestinian arena, northern arena, regional policy, security concept, sensitive issues.

- Directing and managing the defense establishment's external relations, including strategic dialogues, international treaties, and arms control issues, handling policy aspects of defense exports and supervision of defense exports, as well as managing MOD representatives around the world.
- Coordinating with the IDF's Foreign Relations Division, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mossad, Shabak, the National Security Staff, and other government agencies.<sup>4</sup>

This step was supposed to diminish the



*U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman at the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv, April 2017. (DOD, Sgt. Brigitte N. Brantley)*

centrality of the IDF Planning Directorate, to diminish the IDF's involvement in strategic and diplomatic-political affairs and to confine its activity to the military plane.<sup>5</sup> It is immediately apparent that almost all functions performed by the Directorate are also the bailiwicks of other, larger organizations, both in the IDF and in other ministries. The most obvious overlaps are with Planning Directorate of the IDF—the Chief of General Staff at the time apparently opposed its creation—the NSS, and the Foreign Ministry.

Under Gilad, the Politico-Security Directorate was especially influential on Egyptian

affairs, where he was the government's primary interlocutor with both the Mubarak and subsequent regimes. The Directorate was to a large extent a one-man show, the influence of which stemmed from the personality, contacts, and status of its chief and his relationship with his Ministers. Its small staff, composed largely of active and retired military officers, was and is much less influential, except regarding issues firmly in the purview of the MOD, such as relations with other MODs—including strategic dialogues—and sales of military technology. Its overall influence since Gilad's departure is unclear.

---

## Endnotes

1 Shelah, pp. 269-272.

2 In the past, the COGAT was directly responsible for the civil administrations in both the West Bank and Gaza, which de facto was responsible for all government functions and services in these regions: this function has contracted significantly since the Oslo Accords transferring approximately 90 percent of the Palestinian population and 40 percent of the territory in the West Bank to Palestinian control, and since the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005. The COGAT benefits from a well distributed web of expert personnel throughout the West Bank, especially abutting every major Arab city, in the headquarters of the various field units, and the key border crossings. It is one of the few Israeli apparatuses with links—albeit indirect, arms-length, and on humanitarian issues—with the Hamas regime in Gaza, as the authority responsible for coordinating and delivering humanitarian and other aid to Gaza. It is also considered a source of information and expertise regarding political, social, and economic developments in the Palestinian territories.

3 Between 1983 and 2000, a similar unit, known as the Coordinator for Government Activities in Lebanon, existed in the Ministry under Uri Lubrani, former Israeli ambassador to Iran.

4 Ministry of Defense website, [http://www.mod.gov.il/Departments/Pages/Defense\\_Political\\_Branch.aspx](http://www.mod.gov.il/Departments/Pages/Defense_Political_Branch.aspx) [in Hebrew].

5 Similar motives were behind the creation by Ariel Sharon of a National Security Unit in the MOD between 1981-1983, under former Chief of IDF Planning Directorate Major General (ret.) Avraham Tamir. Dudi Siman-Tov, "The Development of the Strategic Profession in the IDF," *Dado Center Journal: Contemporary Issues in Operational Art*, vol. 14 (December 2017), p. 124 [in Hebrew]. It is interesting to note that between 1975 and 1979, the Planning Directorate was defined as a joint civilian-military body and was subject to both the military authority of the Chief of Staff and the civilian authority of the Defense Minister. This situation ended because the Chief of the Planning Directorate was caught in a tug of war between two authorities, and found it impossible to work (Ben Meir, p. 123).

# THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES

---

Since its inception, the IDF has been the most significant institutional actor in Israeli national security affairs. While PMs and Defense Ministers have been the most important decision makers, both the formation and the implementation of decisions have been much affected by the IDF in the Israeli national security constellation. This is due to several reasons:

- Throughout most of Israel's existence, issues of security—narrowly defined to the physical and military realm—have been considered the most important and pressing of all issues of national policy. This gave the military preeminent weight in national policy analysis and creation, leading to a deformation of the Israeli national security establishment and the stunted development of civilian organs.
- Many of the most senior civilian decision makers in Israel, until the most recent governments, have had a professional military background, which seems to have given them a predisposition to prefer military views and expertise.<sup>1</sup>
- The size of the population, the limited candidate pool interested in national security affairs as a career, and the existence of compulsory service lead to the military “getting a first crack” at

young candidates. In this context, prestige afforded service in military intelligence, as well as the existence of programs which enable high school graduates—in Israel's case, especially those interested in international relations, Middle East studies, and Arabic—to study in university

in exchange for extended service as officers upon graduation, ensures that these functions are well-staffed in the IDF. A plurality—if not majority—of Israeli civilian experts in national security, the Middle East, and foreign affairs began their careers in military intelligence or strategic planning.

- In a country with many internal conflicts and disagreements, the IDF is consistently rated among the most highly respected and trusted institutions, much more than the government, the civilian bureaucracy and the Knesset.<sup>2</sup>
- The IDF is a large, capable, disciplined, and mission-oriented organization, with a can-do mentality. It therefore not rarely

***Since its inception, the IDF has been the most significant institutional actor in Israeli national security affairs.***



is given or takes upon itself nationally critical projects of a non-military nature which no one else is capable of doing, for either objective or bureaucratic-political reasons.

The IDF influence in the policy process occurs at several levels and through several organizations within the IDF. The IDF, especially in the past decade, is a highly centralized organization. The expertise and influence is concentrated in the Kirya, the Armed Forces Headquarters in central Tel Aviv. While there is a level of expertise in the command and staff levels in the regional and functional commands (Northern, Southern, Central, Depth, Home Front), they do not possess significant influence at the national policy-making level.<sup>3</sup> The Chief of

General Staff of the IDF is not just a staff function; he also serves as the Commander of the Armed Forces. The CGS is the direct commander of all officers and other ranks in the IDF. The CGS is also the chief military advisor to the Government and to the PM. He reports through the Defense Minister, but is not subordinate to him. He is the only active officer in the IDF to hold the rank of Lieutenant General.

The CGS, therefore, is an extremely powerful player in the Israeli national defense constellation. He commands the biggest and most influential organizational actor, which is also the most trusted and respected, and has the largest staff to analyze strategic issues and develop policies and policy positions. He and his organization are generally



*Minister of Defense Moshe Yaalon with Chief of General Staff Benny Gantz. (GPO)*

considered apolitical, and most CGS have been popular with the public.<sup>4</sup> The CGS is actually positioned between the military and civilian leadership and functions as the link between them, and therefore straddles the gap between political and professional leaderships.

The CGS and the general officers of the IDF influence policy significantly in their role as the most significant, basically the sole, arbiters of what is feasible and reasonable in contemplating the use of military force, or any other major decisions and steps which might affect national security. They also exert influence over policy through their use of their bully pulpit. Every public statement—and many off-the-record and leaked statements—of these officers is given heavy press coverage and discussion. In this way, the IDF can influence and shape public perceptions and debate, especially in cases when there is controversy over policy, which are then reflected in a significant way in the policy debate at the political level.<sup>5</sup>

The most significant bureaucratic actors within the IDF on strategic issues are the Directorate of Military Intelligence, known by its Hebrew acronym, AMAN, and the Directorate of Planning, or AGAT.

Much has been written about the AMAN.<sup>6</sup> It is most significant due to the fact that while Israel does have an intelligence *community*, with several different agencies dealing with research and analysis,<sup>7</sup> the AMAN Research Division is the largest the most influential,

especially relating to issues of a military or strategic nature, broadly defined. Its influence is also great since the head of AMAN and of its Research Division have historically seen themselves as “dual-hatted,” responsible not only to the CGS and the Defense Minister as their G-2 (military intelligence officer), but also as the “national assessor,” responsible for presenting intelligence assessments on all issues—military, but also strategic, political, technological, and economic—to the Government and its ministers. One well-informed observer notes that the head of AMAN “is closer to the ear of the PM than any other uniformed officer apart from the CGS.”<sup>8</sup>

***The CGS and IDF general officers influence policy significantly as arbiters of what is reasonable and feasible in the use of military force.***

The fact that AMAN is within the military and under the ultimate command of the CGS provides the IDF command and the Defense Minister with a powerful tool for influencing the national security processes. It is the most important source of information regarding enemies, friends, “frenemies,” and the dynamics of the international and regional system. This information is the key input in creating a picture of the current and future situation and of the wider environment in which policy is made. In addition, intelligence analysts are expected to predict the probable results of various policy moves contemplated



by the government, which enables them significant influence on the assessment of the efficacy of such actions.

***AGAT is the largest and most organized strategic planning organ in the government, and enjoyed a monopoly on strategic planning for many years.***

Since Israel has a limited, though extremely capable, pool of personnel who are experts on Middle East and strategic issues, the fact that hundreds of them are concentrated in AMAN's Research Division means that its officers often trespass on spheres which are not specifically those of intelligence analysts.

This includes participation in strategic dialogues led by the Defense and Foreign Ministries and the NSS; briefings of foreign and Israeli politicians, journalists and other opinion leaders, functioning as a de facto arm of the public diplomacy of the government; suggesting policy initiatives; and even participation in diplomatic discussions and peace talks. AMAN doctrine is proactive, seeks not only to inform policy, but also to influence policy, and often appends recommendations to its analysis.

AMAN also has another division, its Operations Division, that has more operational input into the national security policy process. This Operations Division is responsible for the military's influence/information operations and special operations apparatus. These functions are quite

important since Israeli military doctrine now stresses the "campaign between the wars." The political leadership in Israel has shown a preference for use of covert operations—kinetic and influence—to achieve strategic effects in a low-key, deniable way without the need for discussion outside the generally close-mouthed security establishment.

The Planning Directorate (AGAT), while smaller and less influential than AMAN, has also been a significant IDF organizational player in the policy process. AGAT was set up in the wake of the Yom Kippur War; it is the largest and most organized dedicated strategic planning organ in the Israeli government, and for many years, enjoyed a monopoly over strategy and strategic planning in Israel.<sup>9</sup> Today, it includes two divisions relevant to the national policy process, the Strategic Division and the Foreign Relations Division. AGAT also shares with AMAN's Operations Division responsibility for a new department of a significantly "political" nature: Influence, Legitimacy and Lawfare.<sup>10</sup> The Strategic Division is responsible for politico-military and long-range planning for the IDF, especially the analysis of foreign policy and image constraints on military operations. It also represents the IDF in various governmental and interdepartmental fora, where it presents "the IDF position." Its establishment in 1994 was in order to provide staff support for the peace talks with the Palestinians and Arab states. It is largely staffed with officers with an intelligence or air force background. The Foreign Relations Division is responsible for what the IDF

terms “military diplomacy:” cooperation, coordination, and contacts with other militaries, most significantly the American, Egyptian, and Jordanian armed forces as well as with peacekeeping forces in the IDF’s area of responsibility.

The responsibilities held by these two divisions make the Commander of AGAT a significant player in the national security constellation of Israel. One analyst opines that “the story of policy planning in Israel is the story of the development of the Planning Directorate.”<sup>11</sup> Many, however, note the problematic “doubled-hattedness” of the Planning Directorate, which is the General Staff’s strategic analysis body manned by military officers, but, at the same time, it is supposed to carry out strategic analysis in political and civilian issues for the political leadership. Criticism has been levelled at AGAT for its involvement in issues which are of an entirely non-military nature, especially foreign policy issues, not addressed by uniformed military organizations elsewhere in the Western world. One former Cabinet minister said, “AGAT plans well, but does things which it is not improper for the IDF to do.”<sup>12</sup>

AGAT’s influence has waxed and waned over the years of its existence, and, in recent years, its preeminence in Israeli strategic planning, and its role in the IDF itself, seems to have declined. This decline came as a result of the creation of the NSS and of the strengthening of the operational components within the IDF. One former

senior official in the PMO says that “AGAT often doesn’t know what is really going on, so its analysis and recommendations are often irrelevant and disregarded.” In the IDF, it is often seen as an “ivory tower,” largely irrelevant and disengaged from mainstream, operational concerns.

The General Staff Operations Directorate has been increasingly significant in policy matters since the Second Lebanon War (2006). This is due to both its responsibility for developing and implementing war and operational plans, but also to the routinizing of the conflict with Gaza and the “campaign between the wars” in the North and in Sinai, which have given more weight to the warfighters rather than

*The “tacticization” of strategic issues in Israel regarding the use of force tends to strengthen the impact and influence of policy.*

the long-range planners. It is worth noting that this process of “tacticization” of strategic issues in Israel regarding use of force—which leads to their treatment as “force utilization” issues properly addressed by the relevant professional operators, rather than political decisions to be discussed and debated—tends to strengthen the impact and influence of operational levels on policy. The staff work and preparation of military options, as well as their presentation, are in the hands of the IDF. This enables it de facto to mold the perceptions of the political level and pre-determine its decisions through its control

of the intelligence and the military planning process and the nature of its presentation of information.

While the Israeli Air Force commander is under the CGS and a member of the General Staff Forum,<sup>13</sup> he also is the direct

***The security establishment has often been attacked for the political right for its “leftism” and for expending too much effort on functions outside of its core ones.***

commander of the IAF, which is an extremely centralized, long-range-oriented and staff-rich organization. It is not surprising that, similarly to AMAN, serving and former IAF officers can be found in almost all of the policy-relevant organs in the IDF and the various other government organizations. The Air Force is the “long arm”

of Israeli strategy and policy, and it is the primary tool for addressing out-of-theater threats, especially Iran; it has also positioned itself as the key go-to instrument of ongoing counter-terror activity in Gaza, Sinai, and Lebanon as well as the main component of the “campaign between the wars” in the Levant. It is also responsible for air and anti-ballistic missile defense. This means that the Air Force, and especially the IAF Commander, has significant influence when it comes to forming, implementing, and assessing the feasibility of policies regarding the Iran nuclear and missile threat as well as regarding the covert war with the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah “Axis.”<sup>14</sup>

IDF officers participated actively in all of Israel’s diplomatic processes with its neighbors and often had a large role in drafting the agreements, preparing the maps and actually negotiating with the Arab interlocutors. Deputy CGS Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, for instance, headed the Israeli delegation to the talks in Taba in 2001. Both Yitzchak Rabin and Ehud Barak preferred to use military men as their staff units during the peace process. Rabin concentrated the staff work on implementation of the Oslo Accords in the Strategic Planning Division of the Planning Directorate, and Barak created a “Peace Directorate” in the PMO staffed mainly with active and retired officers. The State Comptroller found in 2001 that the limited personnel of AGAT’s Strategic Planning Division had been so engaged since 1994 in what he defined as their “primary responsibility” of supporting negotiations that they were forced to neglect other competencies, including that of military strategy.<sup>15</sup>

This process did not go uncriticized. The Foreign Ministry and others have often decried the involvement of the military and the security services in making and implementing foreign policy. The deep involvement of the military in the peace process led to criticism of its “politicization.” The security establishment has often been attacked from the political right for its “leftism”<sup>16</sup> and for expending too much effort on functions outside its core ones. Upon taking office in 1995, PM Netanyahu did not like senior officers’ involvement in

political matters and was against their direct involvement in diplomatic activity.<sup>17</sup> Israeli military scholar Dudi Siman-Tov sees the decline in AGAT's stature as stemming from a "pendulum movement," with AGAT having been intimately involved with the political leadership regarding planning aspects of the peace process with the Palestinians, and now being marginalized as the process has come to a halt and the complexion of the political leadership has changed.<sup>18</sup>

Criticism of the IDF's dominant role in the policy-making process is not limited to civilian circles, but is marked among serving and former IDF senior officers. One former general explained,

The IDF cannot think at the proper grand-strategic level. It is not capable of taking into account all the aspects and concerns which are relevant to the [elected] decision-maker. . . . Other concerns—such as international legitimacy, relations with allies—while not military, are no less important nationally, and can seriously affect issues which are, on their surface, military (such as whether to attack Lebanese national infrastructure in the Second Lebanon War). . . . AGAT tries to do that [bring in these broader considerations], but it 'doesn't live there.'<sup>19</sup>

The IDF Command is reported to feel that the role it plays in decision-making is often disproportional and that the political level prefers not to fully exercise its authority in these spheres and to exist in an area of murkiness/opacity. This preference by elected officials is due to the domestic and

personal political costs of making clear the strategy, policy, and assumptions underlying them. The political level therefore prefers not to carry out an organized and clear process—and is perhaps incapable of doing so—but rather to let the professional level make strategy and policy, while attempting to read and translate the unspoken and/or opaque directives of the political level. In this way, the government can also distance itself from unpopular or unsuccessful policies. The political leadership often uses the prestige of the military, which is perceived by most of the public as professional and apolitical, in order to increase support for steps which are controversial politically. Shelah quotes with alarm former PM Olmert's statement after the 2006 Lebanon War: "In a normal state, the one who initiates decisions on the prosecution of a military campaign is not the political level."<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, the IDF cannot function without goals, assumptions, and directives: if it doesn't receive them from above, it will generate them itself. Much of the discussion surrounding the CGS' publication of the "IDF Strategy Document" in 2015 touched on the wish of the CGS to make the conceptual basis of the IDF's plans and activity transparent and to compel the political level to address the national security concept and policy, which have not been officially stated since the time of PM David Ben Gurion. The Knesset Foreign and Defense Affairs Committee (FADC), Subcommittee on the Security Concept and Force-building—headed, it should be noted, by Shelah—noted in a 2017

report that the IDF created its recent multi-year plan largely on its own from the bottom up, with little direction from the political level and with the Cabinet meeting only to approve it after its completion.<sup>21</sup> Yoram Peri, a noted authority on civil-military relations in Israel, opines that in the absence of a clear strategic directive from the government, the military is sometimes forced to determine its own. The IDF is forced to act on a political plane, and the policy it adapts does not always correspond to the wishes of the

elected government. The military was sucked into filling the political leadership vacuum, and its involvement in national policy-making expanded as a result. Therefore, it was not the military's political ambitions but civilian politicians' weakness that brought it there.<sup>22</sup> A former Cabinet member said, "The officers and the officials are excellent. . . . The problem is the politicians."<sup>23</sup>

---

## Endnotes

1 Israeli law since 2007 requires a three year "cooling off period" for senior military and law enforcement officers (over the rank of major general), as well as the heads of Mossad and Shabak, wishing to run for Knesset.

2 Tamar Hermann et al, *The Israel Democracy Index 2017*, Israeli Democracy Institute.

3 The Commanding General, Central Command may be an exception since by virtue of the status of area C of the West Bank as occupied territories under military law, he is the legal sovereign authority in this area, which comprises 61 percent of the territory, including all Jewish settlements. In this area, the CG retains full control over security and civil affairs and must sign off on all civilian matters, including building and other activities in both the Palestinian and Jewish sectors.

4 One interesting fact: many small businesses display pictures of the President, the Prime Minister . . . and the CGS.

5 Israeli civil-military relations expert Yoram Peri noted several cases in which the CGS gave interviews to the press which were in opposition to the policy of the PM and the Government. He notes that the CGS is almost always seen as preparing the way for a political career following retirement. Peri quotes one senior journalist as saying "In Israel, you cannot argue with a serving CGS. The Israeli public loves its CGS, and does not like its Prime Minister so much." Yoram Peri, *Generals in the Cabinet Room: How the Military Shapes Israel's Policy* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), p. 204.

6 See, for example the work of Uri Bar-Joseph.

7 As a result of the 1974 Agranat Committee, which investigated the sources of the Yom Kippur War intelligence failure, analytical departments were set up in the Mossad, the Shabak, and the Foreign Ministry.

8 Shelah, p. 236.

9 Siman-Tov, pp. 118-119.

10 Yochai Ofer, "Preventing Goldstone 2: A New Body in the IDF will Combat De-legitimization," *Haaretz*, December 14, 2016.

11 Freilich, p. 235.

12 The State Comptroller made the same point differently in 2001: "The double role of AGAT may cause duality stemming from the fact that the General Staff planning body, manned by military men whose perspective is basically military, are supposed to carry out strategic analysis in political and civil issues for the political level." State Comptroller's Office, *Yearly Report 52a for the Year 2001*, p. 77 [in Hebrew].

13 Which includes the CGS and his Deputy and the other Major Generals of the IDF, as well as several other officers (the PM's Military Secretary, the IDF spokesman, Budget Director and the Judge Advocate General, and all Brigadier Generals) and several civilians (the DG of the MOD, the Ombudsman, and Chief of R&D in MOD). The Forum was defined in the "Supreme Command Regulations" as "a forum of IDF generals and other officers in the General Staff, which convenes periodically to discuss the issues according to the chief of staff's decision." One set of researchers defines it as the IDF's 'senior management.' See, Lt. Col. Tamar Barash and Lt. Col. Yotam Amitai, "Is the Whole Less than the Sum of Its Parts? Three Perspectives on the 'General Staff Forum' as Senior Management of the IDF," *Between the Poles* (IDF publication), 14, January 2018, pp. 133-149 [in Hebrew].

14 See, interview with outgoing IAF Commander Amir Eshel by Amos Harel, "In the Bottom Line, the Air Force Cannot be Stopped," *Haaretz Weekend Supplement*, August 25, 2017 [in Hebrew].

15 State Comptroller's Office, *Yearly Report 52a*, pp. 87-88, 92.

16 See, e.g., Sami Peretz, "The True Center Party: The IDF," *Haaretz*, October 11, 2017 [in Hebrew].

17 Peri, p. 61.

18 Siman-Tov, p. 127.

19 Personal interview with the author, January 2018.

20 Shelah, p. 249. Shelah (p. 274) states that most of the weaknesses he sees in the dialogue between the military and civilian leaderships stem from the weakness of the latter and are intentional and based on its goal of avoiding responsibility and laying it at the door of the military.

21 *Special Report of the Knesset Foreign and Defense Committee on "Gideon," the IDF's Multi-year Plan*, September 25, 2017 [in Hebrew], pp. 2-4.

22 Peri, p. 13, 31.

23 Personal interview with author, December 2017.

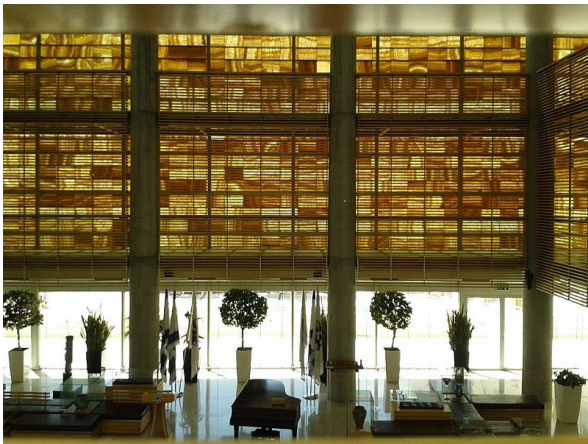


# THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

---

Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has almost always been a secondary player in the national security—and, perhaps more surprisingly, even in the foreign-affairs of the state even though the position of Foreign Minister has existed since the state's founding. Historically, the position has been a prestigious one, held and sought by very senior politicians.

One explanation of this paradox is political: the Foreign Minister post has traditionally gone to one of the PM's most significant rivals in his party (11 out of 16), while two others were the leader of a major coalition partner. The current foreign minister is also the PM. This fact has led PMs to try to minimize their rivals' potential for impacting policy and developing an independent power base, including by making sure the Ministry had a weak role in decision-making.



*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem. (GPO)*

Another deeper explanation for the dichotomy has to do with the securitized nature of Israeli society, and especially public administration. In a country which spent its first four decades at war and under the perception of existential threat, the salience of security issues, and thus the importance of the defense establishment, was preeminent. The issues of foreign policy—like those of all civilian issues—were seen as secondary. As Peri notes, in Israel, there is no separation between foreign and defense policy; he quotes Ben Gurion, who stated in the 1950s that “foreign policy has to serve defense policy.”<sup>1</sup> The security organs of the state became highly developed, sophisticated, and well-resourced when compared to the civilian sector. This, coupled with the high regard—both within the government and in the public—for the military and security services and the can-do mentality of these organizations and their tendency to fill functional vacuums have led to the maintenance and even buttressing of the strong bureaucratic and resource advantages of the security establishment. In addition, Israeli strategic culture leans towards and admires action, bluntness, dependence on personal connections, and the use or threat of force, which leads to a concomitant skepticism and distaste for diplomatic discourse.

Israeli foreign policy has focused on many issues since the creation of the state. The main issues of focus traditionally have been the relationship with the United States,<sup>2</sup> the Palestinian issue, addressing the Iranian and Syrian threats and strategic weapons programs, peace processes with Israel's Arab neighbors, and securing international support for Israel's struggle against Hamas and Hezbollah as well as managing and resolving conflicts with these organizations. Relations with Russia have also joined this category in recent years. All these politico-military issues are seen as the cornerstones of the national security of the Israeli polity and therefore been addressed either by the PM and his circle directly, through the security services and the defense establishment,<sup>3</sup> or handed over to other ministers as personal responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> The MFA is permitted to take the lead role only in areas considered of lesser importance such as foreign relations with the rest of the world—especially Europe and the developing world—international and multilateral organizations, public diplomacy (*hasbara*), relations with Jewish communities and other faiths, and foreign civilian aid.<sup>5</sup> Even these issues, when they become more significant or politically prominent, are often handed off to personal envoys or other political figures.<sup>6</sup> One senior MFA official notes that the MFA does 90 percent of the day-to-day work of Israel's foreign relations, but is often excluded from the core; he notes that Israeli foreign policy is made by the PM, and not by anyone else.<sup>7</sup>

As former MFA Director General Alon Liel

*PM Netanyahu meets with MFA officials in his capacity as Foreign Minister. (Kobi Gideon, GPO)*



notes, “Every committee of inquiry from Agranat [1974] until Vinograd [2007] has said that the Foreign Ministry is the ‘weak link’ in the decision-making process, and that there is a pressing need to strengthen its involvement and its research capabilities. Even though everyone agrees to this, it has not actually happened.”<sup>8</sup>

Since the MFA is not a part of Israel's “security system” (*maarechet habitachon*), a semi-formal designation which includes the military, the MOD and its organs, the security and intelligence services, its access to classified information is often circumscribed. The MFA is widely regarded within the security system as prone to leaks. The Foreign Ministry is either compartmentalized entirely or sensitive information is passed only to a very small cadre of the most senior officials. Access to sensitive, compartmentalized intelligence information, granted largely by AMAN and the security services, is a key asset in the Israel national security constellation, and lack of access limits the accuracy and relevance of analysis and policy recommendations as well as access

***The MFA is also chronically short of resources, especially in comparison to the military and security organs.***

to relevant fora and discussions. This serves as an effective barrier to entry and plays a key role in the marginalization of the Ministry from effective involvement in key issues, most of which contain a substantial classified component. It is especially significant at the mission level since

most of the exposure to sensitive issues is in the executive and functional offices in the Ministry in Jerusalem; the embassies in Washington and the United Nations have on occasion been exceptions to this rule. Another result of this issue is the abiding tension between the Foreign Ministry's missions abroad and those of other ministries which function within the missions, but are independent of them, and often have more significant contacts and activity.<sup>9</sup>

The MFA is also chronically short of resources, especially in comparison to the military and security organs. Its annual budget is approximately 450 million dollars, 0.35 percent of the government budget, of which less than 30 million is discretionary. Its people are poorly paid relative to their colleagues in other organizations and receive fewer benefits. Its budgets are small and the target of cuts and, especially abroad, do not permit many proactive initiatives and in the past have even required the solicitation of donations to fund activities. Its missions are heavily dependent on low-paid Israeli or

local contract personnel even for important functions. The Ministry therefore has suffered from widespread ennui and labor unrest, especially regarding personnel and budget cuts, the shifting in 2015 of central functions to other ministries, especially the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, and its marginalization in the politico-military aspects of the series of military operations between 2006-2014. This finds its expressions in work slowdowns, strikes, widespread leaking, and attrition of talented personnel. One indication is that the number of applicants for the once-prestigious cadets' course, which is extremely selective and serves as the only entrance to the foreign service, had declined markedly, from thousands in the past to approximately 1,300 today for 20 places.<sup>10</sup> Those officers who are accepted, while highly motivated initially, seem often to be socialized over time to a formalistic, fatalistic, and querulous mindset. Many junior foreign service officers leave the service early, due to issues of economics and influence. The existence of unions in the Ministry—which do not exist in the security services and military—impacts the ability to build a merit- and capability-based appointments system, as well as to enable the absorption of expertise from outside. Another problem is that due to the large number and small size of Israeli missions abroad, individuals who serve abroad as ambassadors and consuls general, with high prestige and wide latitude of activity, return to Israel to serve at the working level in less challenging and less rewarding roles.

While there is substantial lateral movement,

especially at the senior level, within the Israeli national security establishment, the MFA is largely outside the flow of personnel between the components of the system. Outsiders, especially from the military and intelligence services, have occasionally entered the senior level of the MFA (DGs and ambassadorships); the reverse almost never occurs. One exception is at the PMO, where career diplomats have served as Foreign Policy Advisors, and occasionally moved to other positions, usually in the public affairs sphere.

***The historical and institutional weaknesses and relative lack of influence of the MFA have become a vicious cycle.***

The overall quality of the foreign service personnel in the MFA has been and remains high. Many Israeli foreign service officers speak foreign languages and have a deep understanding of the politics and cultures of the states they serve in.

These advantages often are not held by their colleagues, especially in the IDF. Specific individuals within the MFA are recognized throughout the national security establishment as of exceptional competence and expertise and enjoy a high status and level of influence, largely divorced from that of their organization. One senior official said in the past that “the Foreign Ministry is a rare case, in that it is less than the sum of its parts.” The ability of the officers and MFA in general to bring this expertise to bear in the policy-making process is limited due to the ingrained Israeli tendency to

distrust or denigrate expertise as well as the tendency (especially among senior officials) to see oneself as an expert, most specifically regarding the United States and the Arab countries. Senior MFA staff rarely appear before the Cabinet or the Knesset FADC, certainly in comparison to senior military or intelligence officers.

The historical and institutional weakness and relative lack of influence of the MFA have become a vicious circle. A generalized feeling of irrelevance and a lack of vigor among its own personnel—as well as a predilection for the “softer” and/or formal aspects of foreign relations—reinforces the tendency by the other national security institutional actors to ignore, belittle, or disregard it, and to continue usurp its functions. Former DG Liel states that

It is clear that they [the personnel of the Ministry] have accepted the fact that the Foreign Ministry is a secondary player in everything connected to decision-making in political, security and especially regional affairs. . . . They feel that they are sentenced to be on the margins, while the [security establishment] will always be in the center. . . . [This leads to a situation] where there is a serious lack of ability in the MFA to provide long-range diplomatic thinking to the decision makers.<sup>11</sup>

The MFA suffers from an organizational culture that viewed its role primarily as a mouthpiece for policies formulated by others and focuses on the management of day-to-day foreign relations, rather than being



deeply involved in formulation of policy. It is also sensitive to matters of status and turf, which consumes much energy in both internal and external struggles.

This has all both been exacerbated by and fed into the tendency of strong Foreign Ministers, the most significant example being three-time minister Shimon Peres, to manage the significant business of the Ministry through their or their DG's personal bureaus and hand-picked assistants and envoys, largely bypassing the ministry's apparatus. The current situation, in which the PM is also the Foreign Minister and carries out foreign policy through the variety of instruments at his disposal, has only deepened the marginalization of the Foreign Ministry apparatus.

In those rare cases and areas where institutional interests and obstacles can be overcome and government entities function in an integrated fashion, or where the issues are seen by the leadership and the strong bureaucratic entities as less vital and therefore less worthy of engagement, the Foreign Ministry has had success. Its efforts to spotlight and to counter anti-Israel bias in international organizations have been met with some success. The successful Israeli efforts in the past decade to promote international economic sanctions on Iran and on terrorist organizations and to promote designation of various entities for financial measures has been led largely by Foreign Ministry personnel, as has been the easing of Israel's diplomatic isolation in

Asia and Africa. In general, on issues where diplomatic activity is centered in multilateral and international organizations, the MFA possesses significant competitive advantage and its Division of International Organizations plays a lead role. Its Legal Division also plays a major part in Israeli government-wide legal efforts ("lawfare") regarding human rights claims against the IDF, along with the Justice Ministry and the IDF Adjutant General's International Law Department. The Division for Strategic Affairs, which deals with arms control, regional security, counterterrorism, and military exports issues, and the Center for Political Research—the intelligence arm of the Ministry—have in recent years been the line divisions with the greatest stature within government and input into the government policy-making process, apart, of course, from the bureau of the Minister and the DG. And of course, the global span of the MFA's missions makes Israeli diplomats one of the key sources of information/intelligence regarding most of the pressing issues of Israeli national security. This is especially so since, unlike the situation in Israel, their interlocutors in the world's Foreign Ministries are often those who handle these issues, such as nonproliferation, sanctions, and legitimacy/recognition issues.

Two exceptions to the general lack of influence of the MFA's missions abroad are the embassies in Washington, D.C. and in the United Nations. These ambassadorships have historically been manned by political appointees, a practice not otherwise prevalent in the Israeli foreign service, or less

frequently by extremely senior professional diplomats. These two offices are the largest of Israel's foreign missions. Their incumbents have on occasion had significant impact on Israeli policy on issues in the purview. Mr. Netanyahu himself, when Ambassador to the United Nations, was an influential figure and began his rise to political prominence there.

---

## Endnotes

1 Peri, p. 47.

2 In an earlier phase, Germany and France.

3 See, e.g. Barak Ravid, "Prime Minister's Office: Israel's Security Ties with Egypt More Important than Cairo Embassy," *Haaretz*, August 8, 2017.

4 Eichner, "With Foreign Ministry Stripped of Powers."

5 See, Itamar Cohen, *The Political-Strategic Planning in the Foreign Ministry: Why Haven't the Recommendations of the Vinograd Commission been Implemented? An Interview with Dr. Alon Liel, former Director General of the Foreign Ministry, in the Wake of the State Comptroller's Report for 2011*, Mitvim Institute, May 1, 2011 [in Hebrew].

6 Barak Ravid, "Thus Netanyahu Dismantled the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," *Haaretz*, 11 June 2013.

7 Personal interview with the author, December 2017. Arad states that while he was NSA, "Netanyahu would call the NSS 'the Prime Minister's MFA,' to the chagrin of the real MFA" (p. 202).

8 Cohen, *The Political-Strategic Planning*.

9 An interesting illustration of the tension and occasional lack of coordination between the MFA and Mossad is the tale of how during a covert visit by Deputy DG Eitan Benzur to Pyongyang in September 1992 to set up a relationship, he was surprised to discover that the Deputy Head of Mossad, Efraim Halevy, was also in North Korea on a similar mission. Nahum Barnea, "How We Missed Out on North Korea," *Yediot Aharonot*, September 19, 2017.

10 Noa Landau, "Israel's Foreign Ministry Cadet Course Goes Begging for Applicants," *Haaretz*, January 23, 2018. The article quotes a senior Foreign Ministry official who said the reason for the drop in demand is a combination of "a sharp decline in the Foreign Ministry's prestige and the profession of diplomacy as well as more attractive alternatives in the private market or other government agencies, as well as a bleak economic future because of the salary and pension conditions."

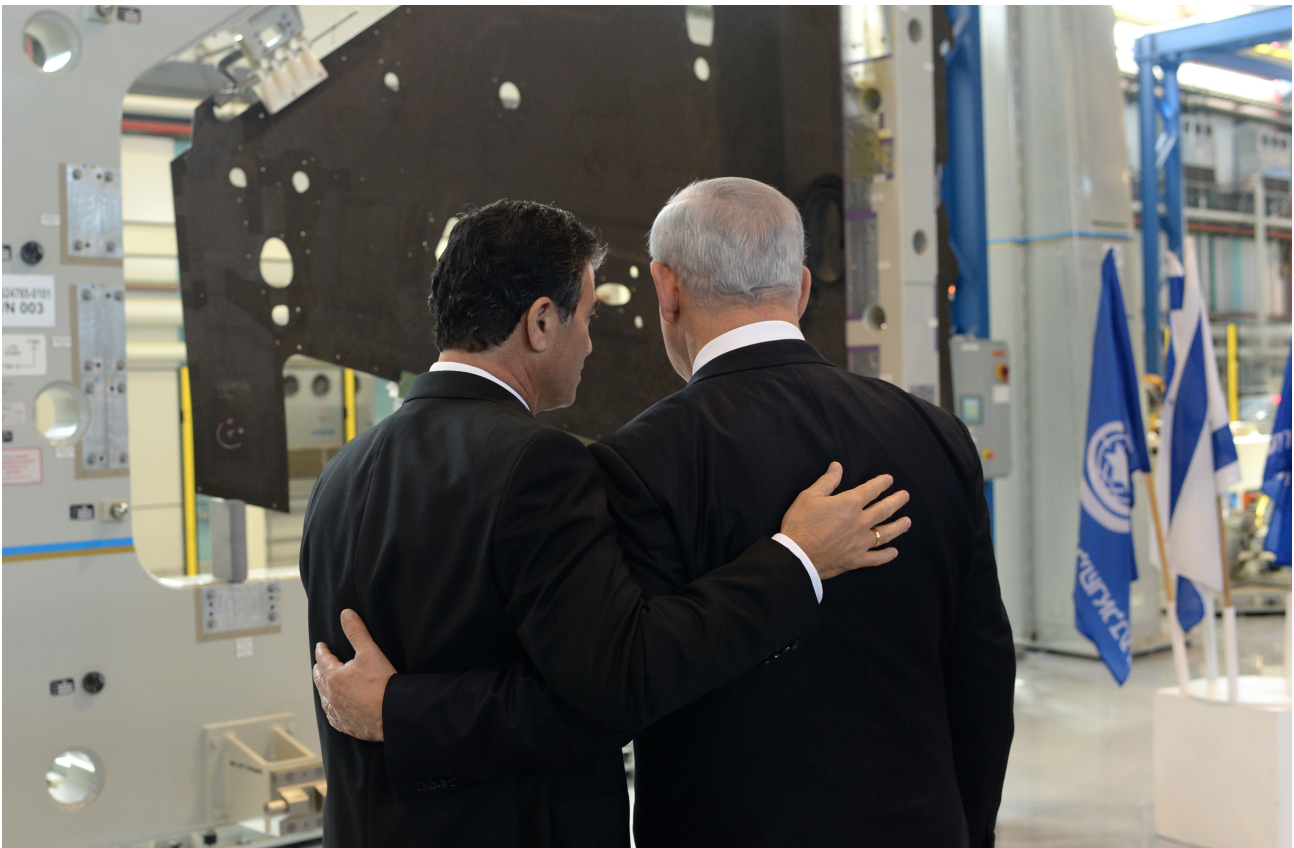
11 Cohen, *The Political-Strategic Planning*.



# THE SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

**T**wo of the key players in the Israeli national security establishment are the Israel Secret Intelligence Service (the external intelligence service – Mossad) and the Internal Security Agency (Shabak). The status of these organs stems from several sources, chief of which is their direct subordination to the PM; unlike the IDF, MOD, or MFA apparatuses, these organizations serve directly at the behest of the PM. In addition, both organizations function as secret services, possess a close-

mouthed, action-oriented organizational culture and have extremely limited public exposure and media activity: their operations, personnel, and even budgets are classified. These are all extremely attractive to the political leadership which has operated for the past decades in a strategic situation which on the one hand, dictates the need for a high tempo of deniable covert and clandestine activity short of war against various new threats, and on the other hand, takes place in an anarchic and overexposed



*PM Netanyahu and then-National Security Advisor (later Mossad Head) Yossi Cohen. (Kobi Gidon, GPO)*

public arena.

Covert action is preferred by policymakers because it is seen as low cost, sidesteps the need for political wrangling, and enables them to sooth their impulse to act. In addition, the ability of the intelligence services to provide the policymaker with unusual, out-of-the box options, as well as to immerse him in a secretive, exciting world of conspiracy and “behind-the-scenes,” is powerful and difficult to match by other, more conventional institutional actors.

The Chiefs of both organizations are senior advisors and major bureaucratic players in their own right. They are both appointed directly by the PM. They participate in Security Cabinet meetings and have direct access to the PM on a regular basis. This access enables them to address and influence not only issues in their direct area of responsibility, but other national security and foreign policy issues of concern. In addition, PMs have often used the security chiefs and their subordinates as secret and/or personal representatives on various issues.

Major operational and other significant issues of Israeli intelligence and security operations requiring mutual notification, consultation, and coordination are discussed by the Heads of Services Committee (known by its Hebrew acronym, VARASH). The Committee, directed by the head of Mossad, includes the head of Shabak, the head of AMAN, the PM’s Military Secretary, and

others on an ad hoc basis.<sup>1</sup>

Mossad has significant influence over national security policy due to its overall authority over three key issues: (1) relations with countries and actors who do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, as well as with foreign intelligence and security services; (2) disruption and thwarting of nonconventional weapons programs in enemy states; and (3) thwarting of terrorist activity against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad. Mossad authority in these issues is often strongly challenged by the IDF, as well as by the MFA and other civilian organs; different PMs have backed its claim to preeminence with varying levels of vigor.

Mossad has been in the forefront of Israeli engagement and cooperation with Arab and Muslim countries throughout Israel’s existence, often to the vexation of the MFA. Its Chiefs and their personnel have served as secret emissaries and intermediaries with foreign governments and organizations on issues extending beyond intelligence. Its pre-1982 involvement with the Christians in Lebanon is well known. One former Chief of Mossad, Efraim Halevy, was a friend of King Hussein of Jordan and a major architect of the 1994 peace treaty. It has been reported that the current Chief of Mossad, who is also the former head of the National Security Staff under PM Netanyahu, and has been replaced in that function by a senior Shabak officer, is the main figure for issues regarding the future of Syria and Iranian involvement there.<sup>2</sup> In addition, to the extent that

intelligence and security services in the West have become more powerful in the post-9/11 era, the Mossad's ties to these organizations, and the ability to access and influence foreign decision-making through these ties, has made the organization even more significant.

As the issue of the Iranian nuclear program became the key issue of Israeli strategic policy in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Mossad was given responsibility for countering the Iranian nuclear threat and integrated all-government efforts in this field.<sup>3</sup>

Shabak, in its turn, has a limited, but extremely important, purview: it is the statutory authority responsible for countering and thwarting terror, intelligence, and subversive activity within the State of Israel and the Occupied Territories. In national security issues and indeed, national policy, it is a key player regarding Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian issue, as well as on Jewish extremism. Its key assets in national security policy-making are its proven operational capabilities and its detailed, intimate

knowledge of and contact in the Palestinian and Israeli Arab scenes. On each of these issues, it "rubs shoulders" with other systemic players, especially the IDF, regarding policy and activity in the West Bank and towards Gaza as well as the Israeli National Police and Internal Security Ministry, regarding Israeli Arabs and East Jerusalem. The Shabak has been given sensitive security and diplomatic missions vis-a-vis the Palestinian Authority and other actors by the PM.<sup>4</sup>

Both services possess analytical departments, as a result of the Agranat Commission which examined inter alia the Israeli intelligence failure in 1973. These two departments offer competing or complementary analyses to those of AMAN which are often—on specific issues—more respected and accepted than AMAN's, especially outside the MOD and IDF.

---

#### Endnotes

1 Center for Intelligence Heritage, <http://malam.cet.ac.il/ShowItem.aspx?ItemID=d803d2ed-c5d8-442b-ac4f-82e6f9f72787&lang=HEB> [in Hebrew].

2 Barak Ravid, "Mossad Chief Heads Delegation to Washington for White House Talks on Syria," *Haaretz*, August 14, 2017; and Ami Rokhes, "Chief of Mossad on the Line Between Washington and Moscow," *Israel Defense*, August 23, 2017 [in Hebrew].

3 Freilich, p. 24; Arad, p. 104; and Shelah, p. 265

4 See, e.g. "Shin Bet Chief Visits Jordan in Bid to Defuse Crisis," *Times of Israel*, July 24, 2017.

# THE NATIONAL SECURITY STAFF

---

**T**he creation of an “Israeli national security council” has been viewed as a panacea since at least the 1970s, though, interestingly, not by those directly involved in policy-making. In 1992, the Basic Law: the Government was amended to include the statement that “the Government shall have a staff, to be set up and operated by the PM, for professional advice in the areas of national security.” This authority was not used until 1999, when the National Security Council was established. The Vinograd Committee to investigate the Second Lebanese War (2006) found that the NSC was ineffective and suggested that its functions, authorities, and relations with other organizations should be formalized in legislation. In October 2007, the Government decided to strengthen the NSC by declaring that its Head will be the PM’s Advisor on National Security, and in 2008, the National Security Staff Law was passed, which also changed the name of the organization to the National Security Staff – NSS.

The NSS came into existence out of an understanding of the weaknesses and failings of the Israeli system and a desire to address them. It was meant by its promoters to increase synchronization and coordination of different views and vectors of defense and foreign policy; to provide civilian leadership—

PM and Cabinet—with real ability to build independent knowledge, analyze options, and influence events; to improve the ability of the leadership to synthesize between the different positions and recommendations coming out of the bureaucracy; and to give policy recommendations of its own. The NSS Law added to its functions the preparation of the staff work for the PM prior to the discussions of the defense, foreign, and security services budgets in an attempt to bolster the NSS’s bureaucratic position.

Much of the analysis conducted in recent years on decision-making in Israeli national security policy—a good part of it by committees of inquiry—has concentrated largely on the NSS, how it functions within the system, and what should be done to strengthen its role. Former NSA Uzi Arad’s view is that the NSS is here to stay, that the process of its establishment and consolidation of power is irreversible, and that it is has taken its place as the PM’s and the Cabinet’s primary staff organization and a leading element, perhaps *the* leading element in the Israel national security establishment. In his view, “the creation of the NSS is a success story – the success of a crucial process of organizational change.”<sup>1</sup>

This view is perhaps overly optimistic; it



stands in contrast to how the process and the NSS are experienced and described by other practitioners. The NSS has not achieved either the stature or the centrality of theoretically parallel organizations such as the American National Security Council or the British Privy Council Office. It has, despite the best efforts of its Heads and personnel, not become *the* overseer or coordinator in the Israeli national security constellation, but rather one player among many, and in many areas, not a particularly powerful one.<sup>2</sup> Much of its work currently concentrates on the preparation of meetings of the Security Cabinet and of the Government, in security and foreign affairs, and their summary. This proximity to the seat of power, and intimate knowledge of the process at the highest level, is seen by many in the NSS as its most significant asset. Control over the agenda of meetings of the Cabinet and the Government is another key source of power: this is wielded in the first instance by the PM, but usually by the NSS acting for him.

One former NSA notes that the NSS fulfills important functions in several areas:

- It enables the PM and the ministers to be more prepared for Cabinet meetings.
- For the first time, there is a body at the top of the system, which has no organizational interest that can view issues with a broad view.
- There is now an all-government organ, which can take up issues and projects that cut across ministerial boundaries, and for

this reason, were often unaddressed in the past.

- The NSS, in his view, has no comparative advantage over any other organization in their fields of expertise. Its advantage is its “view from above,” its lack of an organizational interest, its proximity to the PM, and its ability to integrate issues which are not handled by anyone else.

While the Head of the NSS, who since 2008 is also the National Security Advisor, is usually a highly respected figure from the national security establishment, the status and prominence of the NSA is to a large degree decoupled from that of the NSS. In his dual role as confidential advisor to the PM and as the head of a bureaucratic entity, success in the first does not necessarily result in, or even connect to, success in the second.

***The NSS has not achieved either the stature or the centrality of theoretically parallel organizations such as the U.S National Security Council.***

The NSS apparatus’ primary vector of influence on policy-making is through the NSA: if he is not significant in the PM’s circle, or if he is significant and influential, but does not make use of the bureaucracy under him, this primary avenue is closed.<sup>3</sup>

One former senior NSS official sees the relationship between the PM and the NSA as a two-edged sword: the status and influence of the NSA and the NSS are dependent on



***The NSS has mostly functioned as little more than a secretariat by consolidating—rather than creating—knowledge.***

the degree to which the PM sees it as useful to him. But this can lead to a situation where they are perceived as a yes-man or lackey, rather than an authentic advisor, providing advice which feeds his predispositions. They noted for instance the

case of the public debate over the terms of the concessions for companies extracting gas from Israel's deposits, which made its way to the Supreme Court, where the NSS produced analysis supporting the PM's position in favor of the concessions, based on national security considerations.<sup>4</sup>

While many NSAs in the past decade have possessed significant sway, the NSS has mostly functioned as little more than a secretariat by consolidating—rather than creating—knowledge. This is largely due to personnel and capacity issue, which has plagued the NSS since its founding. The Staff has about 50 professional staff. It is top-heavy, with a vice-Head, eight directorates, four of whom are headed by Deputy Heads of NSS. It also includes the Counter-terrorism Staff, usually headed by a Brigadier General or equivalent, and is manned largely by ex-military or security officers, many of whom did not work in the strategic field earlier, and by young civilians. There is very little seconding of personnel from government agencies and very little representation in the NSS of expertise from outside of

government, from academia for instance. As Brent Sasley notes, senior or ambitious civil servants and security officials are reluctant to be posted to the NSS: "if good people don't work for it, and principals send junior representatives to it, its chances of being ignored increase considerably, because it won't have the weight of well-known and respected thinkers."

Another reason for the continued bureaucratic weakness of the NSS is that the vested interests of all the other bureaucratic players and their political masters were from the first instance against the development of another significant power center "over their heads."<sup>5</sup> It was seen as adding another layer of bureaucracy between the operational arms of government and the political leadership, slowing policy and action, while it was not clear what benefit the new organ was bringing. It was seen as duplicating functions being carried out in any case, and in a more professional fashion, by existing structures, especially the intelligence analysis departments and AGAT. The existing bureaucratic players assessed that its influence over the PM and government policy and its ability to create analytical, intellectual, and policy-relevant added value was small, and based largely on their own contributions to its work.<sup>6</sup> As one former senior NSS official said, "New organizations find it very hard to create value added."<sup>7</sup> Brig. General (ret.) Udi Dekel, now at the Institute for National Security Studies and formerly the commander of AGAT's Strategic Planning Division, notes that the NSS' status

is still unresolved, and that it is still fighting for its place and for the attention of the prime minister, versus other security bodies.<sup>8</sup>

The NSS often resorts to legalistic arguments, citing the 2008 NSS Law to try to compel its inclusion in the decision-making process. This is an artifact of the circumstances of the NSS' establishment, with the organization coming into being not organically but through fiat, a process not well-suited to the Israeli psyche and political culture. As a former senior NSS official said, "If you need to quote the law, you have failed."<sup>9</sup> It is not enough to legislate a bureaucratic entity into being: it requires sustained commitment and engagement by the Chief Executive to change the way business is done. The NSA and NSS did not enter a space which had not been occupied before them and needed to a large extent to hew an area of responsibility from what others viewed as their own *latifundia*. The FADC Subcommittee on the Security Concept and Force-building in its Report on the IDF Five-Year "Gideon" Plan noted:

The NSS is not, as it should be according the NSS Law of 2008, a significant staff body for the political level, which helps shape the directives of the political level taking into account the goals and resources of the State, and make sure that its directives to the IDF are reflected in plans for building and using the force.<sup>10</sup>

It is not clear who the NSS' "customer" is:

the PM? the Security Cabinet? These are not the same and are often at loggerheads; the PM often has no interest in the Cabinet developing its own sources of information and expertise. One former NSA says that the NSA's client is the PM, with whom he must have a relationship of personal trust and respect, while the NSS's client is the Cabinet. It may be noted that even the PMs themselves, who ostensibly should be the most interested in seeing a robust and active NSS, have paid little heed to the NSS, preferring to work through their executive office and personal, often informal, advisors or the existing national security bureaucracies. This of course further weakens the NSS in its relations with the other components of the security constellation.<sup>11</sup> As former NSA and Chief of Mossad Ephraim Halevy notes, "We must understand that the [NSS] gets influence depending on the will of the prime minister," and that only with the Prime Minister's support can you "get lots of results" from the NSS.<sup>12</sup>

**It is not clear who the NSS "customer" is: the PM? the Security Cabinet?**

There is a tension between the NSS' role in short term, day-to-day servicing of the PM's and Cabinet's affairs and coordination of policy and its more basic role in long-range and in-depth strategic planning. Freilich understands these gaps. He notes that

The [NSS] has partly come to be viewed as a further policy

advocate, another player, rather than the supraplayer whose role is to ensure that the [PM] and cabinet are presented with all relevant options. . . . Statute may force [PM]s to go through the motions and uphold the letter of the law, but they cannot be forced to do so in spirit. . . . The [NSS]'s actual influence will be a function of the role accorded it by the specific [PM] in office and the existing political constellation at the time. . . . To an extent, however, the attempt to establish an NSC-type entity in a parliamentary system in somewhat unnatural to begin with, akin to a body responding to a skin graft. . . . The very essence of an NSC, as a body sitting atop the policy process, at least partially conflicts with the nature of the parliamentary system, in which the [PM] is just 'first among equals.'<sup>13</sup>

The NSS is a relatively new component of the Israeli policy-making system. It has been in existence for 20 years, but has only gained significance in the past decade, with the reforms attendant on its anchoring in legislation. Freilich asserts that it is still too early to tell whether the Staff will overcome the opposition of the other organizational actors, obtain significant influence and fulfill fully its intended integrating function. But he claims that "the trajectory is good:" The PM and the Cabinet are already better informed and prepared for decision-making than in the past, and the NSA does head most of the major international efforts of the Israeli government. However, Freilich, too, notes that the weight and significance of the NSS is dependent primarily on the interest of the PM in making use of it, including his willingness to enforce its integrative functions on the other players, which has not been the case until now.

---

#### Endnotes

1 Arad, pp. 372, 14, 275.

2 Interestingly, Ben Meir notes (p. 129) that almost all of the dozens of experts and former policymakers he interviewed in the early 1980s felt the system needed a major reform. The only one who questioned the need for such a reform was the well known political scientist and former MFA DG Shlomo Avineri. Avineri claimed that the creation of an additional control and supervisory mechanism would merely generate an additional bureaucratic constituency, thus further complicating the system. As noted, this is exactly what in fact occurred.

3 Some senior veterans of the NSS assert that the NSA is dependent on his staff for updates, information, and ideas and would not be able to function effectively without it and that it is the staff which provides him with his bureaucratic heft. While this may be partially true, the Israeli experience proves that experienced, well-connected individuals, with the ear of the PM, can inform and influence policy-making regardless of whether they are supported by a staff or not.

4 See, Avi Ben-Eli, "Who Again Recommended to Steinitz to give Advantages to the Gas Monopoly? The NSS and the Foreign Ministry," *Haaretz (the Marker Economic Supplement)*, August 23, 2017 [in Hebrew]; and

Brent E. Sasley, "The Price Israel Pays for its Poor National-Security Decision Making," *The Atlantic*, June 10, 2013.

5 The Military Secretary (see p. 6) is perceived by past and current members of the NSS as the chief "competitor" to the NSA and the NSS within the PMO, despite the fact that he does not possess a significant staff with substantive capabilities.

6 A former senior NSS official explains that the main function of the NSS today, in their view, is to prepare briefing books, talking points, and profiles for the PM's many meetings with foreign dignitaries and trips abroad. These are usually integrative products, based on papers received from the various organizations. Personal interviews with the author, December 2017.

7 Personal interview with author, December 2017.

8 Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Lapid: NSC Doesn't Work, Because Netanyahu Doesn't Want it to Work," *Jerusalem Post*, January 16, 2017.

9 Personal interview with the author, December 2017.

10 Knesset Foreign and Defense Committee, *Report*, 2004, <http://www.knesset.gov.il/committees/heb/docs/confidence.pdf>, p. 3.

11 Frustration with the gap between the prestige and the reality of the position has led to rapid turnover among the heads of the NSS, especially before the function was merged with the NSA: six, and two acting NSAs, between 1999-2008, with only two serving as much as two years.

12 Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Lapid: NSC Doesn't Work."

13 Freilich, pp. 239, 243.

# THE “MINI MINISTRIES”

---

One characteristic fairly unique to the Israeli national security establishment, which has increased dramatically in the past decade, is the existence of what I will term “Mini-ministries.” These are ministries whose *raison d’être* is due to internal party or coalition considerations, enabling a politician to receive a ministerial portfolio by creating a new ministry which has only bare-bones organizational structure: that is, has a minister, a Director General, and a small number of employees, mostly of either senior or clerical grades, and often duplicates the functions of other ministries. Many of these ministries are managed administratively by the PMO.

In today’s government, the 34<sup>th</sup> in 70 years, there are quite a few such ministries, often headed by a minister who also heads another more significant ministry.<sup>1</sup> A few examples of these ministries are:

- The Ministry for Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy
- The Ministry for Intelligence Affairs
- The Ministry for Jerusalem and Legacy Affairs
- The Ministry for Diaspora Affairs
- The Ministry for Regional Cooperation

- The Ministry for Development of the Periphery, the Negev and the Galil
- The Ministry for Social Equality<sup>2</sup>

This is not a new phenomenon. In the past, PMs made much more use of the position of Minister Without Portfolio. In the current government, there are no ministers bearing this title, while in the past, there have been governments with six or seven. The concept was always subject to criticism and was for a short time actually banned by legislation. One former Minister Without Portfolio spoke of the systemic advantages of having an informed, engaged, experienced senior figure, unburdened by day-to-day responsibilities for a line ministry, who can help the PM in his thought and planning processes and take on special tasks as required.<sup>3</sup> The creation of “mini-ministries” seems to be a modern re-definition of the concept of Minister Without Portfolio, under which each minister is given a notional area of responsibility, even if often extremely circumscribed. One result of this proliferation of ministers and ministries with overlapping responsibilities or mandates is confusion among foreign interlocutors who is actually significant and who speaks for the government.

Several of these ministries have the potential to be players in the Israeli national security constellation. This is almost always



a function of the relationship between the Minister and the PM and/or the Minister's power position within the political system, and not intrinsic within the definition of ministry's mandate itself. Throughout Israel's history, there have been ministers who had significant impact on national security policy and/or membership in the Security Cabinet or other ad hoc ministerial "kitchens," despite the fact that they did not have ministerial responsibility for one of the key national security ministries. This was usually a function of either special relationships with the PM, being the heads of coalition partner parties, or relevant previous experience, usually former senior officers in the military or the security services. Some examples:

- Israel Galili, the former head of

the National Command of the pre-Independence Haganah, who had much influence over PMs Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir, and served as a Minister Without Portfolio from 1966-1977.

- Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, former CGS, carried out secret coordination with the Palestinian leadership on behalf of PM Ehud Barak, while serving as Tourism Minister.
- Shaul Mofaz, former CGS and Defense Minister, as Transportation Minister (2006-2009) was given responsibility for coordination with the U.S. government on the Iranian issue.
- Current Minister of Jerusalem Affairs Zeev Elkin, a Likud stalwart born in



*PM Netanyahu with Russian President Vladimir Putin (GPO)*

the Soviet Union, who accompanies Netanyahu on his trips to Russia, including in his previous job as Deputy Foreign Minister. He acts as Netanyahu's personal interpreter in negotiations with Putin.

The two most theoretically relevant ministries for national security decision-making are Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy, which has existed since 2006 (with a hiatus between 2008-2009), and Intelligence Affairs, which has existed since 2009; the two ministries were merged in 2014-2015 and separated again in 2015. There is in fact less to these ministries than may appear. Their predominant function, until 2015, was to provide an bureaucratic platform for a senior minister who the PM wished, for personal or political reasons, to enable to be engaged in national security issues, especially Iran, as a member of the security cabinet, but for various reasons—usually political—could not be given one of the operational ministries dealing with these issues.

The Strategic Affairs Ministry had for most of its existence no specific operational function or area of specialization. Its personnel, who are almost all former senior officers from the military or security services, often duplicated—some would say complicated—the activity of other ministries and government bodies, with little coordination or oversight. Arad notes that this Ministry often “volunteered” to carry out integration or oversight of various issues and in fact

duplicated the work of the NSS. He notes that “this is a sign of a ministry which has no specialization or organizational memory, but has time on its hands.”<sup>4</sup> In May 2015, PM Netanyahu decided to give the Ministry, whose Minister holds concurrently the portfolio of Internal Security Minister, the responsibility for public diplomacy (*hasbara*) and the struggle against de-legitimization and Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), along with an infusion of personnel and funding. The Ministry was formally renamed the Ministry for Strategic Affairs and *Hasbara*. Its involvement in national security issues other than public diplomacy and anti-BDS activity has been minimal since 2015.

**Proliferation of ministers and ministries with overlapping responsibilities leads to confusion among foreign interlocutors.**

The Ministry for Intelligence Affairs was created in 2009 for Dan Meridor, a respected Likud expert on national security issues. The ministry has no command, management, or oversight function over the components of the Israeli intelligence community. Mossad and Shabak are under the PMO, and AMAN is under the CGS and the Defense Minister. The current Intelligence Minister is also the Minister for Transportation. The assignment in 2015 of these two ministries to ministers who also are responsible for large operational ministries with wide responsibilities and significant personnel and budgets seems to indicate a further downgrading of their importance.

---

**Endnotes**

1 The “double-hatting” of ministers in the current government seems to be a method of retaining ministries which can be distributed later to future new coalition partners, especially since the Supreme Court has limited the ability of the PM to hold multiple ministerial portfolios at the same time. At one point, PM Netanyahu held seven ministerial portfolios; he now holds only two.

2 Another example is the Ministry for Home Front Defense, which existed from 2011-2014, and served predominantly to afford a ministerial portfolio to former CGS Matan Vilnay, as well as to Avi Dichter and Gilad Ardan.

3 Personal interview with author, December 2017.

4 Arad, p. 267.

# THE KNESSET FOREIGN AND DEFENSE COMMITTEE

---

The Knesset Foreign and Defense Committee is the parliamentary oversight committee which encompasses both foreign and security affairs. Its purpose is to enact legislation on such affairs, to supervise and oversee the activities of the relevant government ministries, and to approve their budgets. These duties are seen as doubly important since these issues lack the public scrutiny and discussion regarding other issues of the State. The FADC fulfills these missions through summoning individuals and receiving information; examining and discussing the decisions and actions of the government and its branches and other issues of relevance to national security; approving of certain decisions, orders, and actions of the executive branch, determined by statute; and presenting its findings and

views to the executive branch.<sup>1</sup>

The plenum of the committee consists of 21 members and 15 alternate members. Alternate members have all the rights except voting: they may vote in place of an absent member, if it is prearranged. All parties in the Knesset are represented in the Committee except the United Arab List: the Arab parties historically do not participate in this committee. Sessions of the FADC and its subcommittees are, as opposed to most of the Knesset committees, closed; sessions of the whole committee are classified Secret, and those of some of the subcommittees are classified as Top Secret. Most of the work of the FADC is carried out within the subcommittees, which are smaller, carry out in-depth, serious, classified work and hearings, and include members who have developed substantive expertise in their issues. These subcommittees include Intelligence and Secret Services; Security Concept and Force-building; Readiness, Legislation, Personnel in the IDF; Foreign Affairs and Public Diplomacy; Cyber Defense; Home Front; National Planning; the Israel Atomic Energy Commission; and Lawfare. There is also a combined subcommittee of the FADC and the Finance Committee for the Defense Budget, which since 2006, receives a full classified version of the budget, with detailed line items; it also approves large



*PM Netanyahu appears before the Knesset Foreign and Defense Committee (seated beside Committee Chairman MK Avi Dichter)*



projects and shifts between items in the budget. The committee as a whole, while large—it includes 30 percent of MKs since membership in it is seen as prestigious—as well as each subcommittee, includes a core of MKs who are informed and active in their fields of interest, have a high public profile.

The FADC has influence in the policy-making process in several ways:

- The senior figures in the national security establishment (PM, Defense Minister, Foreign Minister, MFA DG, NSA, heads of intelligence services, CGS, and general officers) are required to appear before the Committee at regular, predetermined intervals: some every six weeks, some every two months, some twice a year, and some once a year.
- The committee, and especially the subcommittees, can request information and briefings from all members of the executive branch and security services, including at short notice. The officials will almost always appear and prepare themselves well. There may be several sessions in the subcommittees each week, in which experts—including from the working level—brief the MKs. This oversight is said to lead to more care by the security establishment in its activities.
- There are MKs in the Committee who are well known and respected and whose views are of interest and influence within the bureaucracy. Its Chairman is always one of the most respected and influential politicians or statesman in the country (the current chairman, Avi Dichter, is a former head of Shabak and Internal Security Minister). The Opposition members of the Committee are often quite senior: the current committee includes former Finance, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Science and Technology Ministers as well as three retired generals. They are also quite active since the Committee is one of the few channels of influence open to them.<sup>2</sup>
- The activity in the subcommittees is reported to be almost free of partisan politics and is characterized by a cordial and professional atmosphere. One knowledgeable source in the Committee says that their influence is often on processes: the different bureaucratic players often meet when appearing before the committee and the fact that there are very few leaks from the FADC and even less from the subcommittees means officials and officers can express themselves more freely there. He notes that officials and officers feel more comfortable speaking in the FADC than in the Cabinet and also assesses that members of the Committee are better informed than most members of the Cabinet, though they have of course much less formal and direct influence.<sup>3</sup>
- The committee holds hearings and discussions on issues which it—or its members—find of interest or concern. It consults with experts both within and



outside government and can publish reports and findings. The classified versions go to relevant authorities, and while non-binding, they are usually addressed in a serious and detailed manner. The committee also occasionally releases unclassified versions of its reports, inter alia, to stimulate public discussion.

The FADC can mainly raise consciousness of issues and put them on the public agenda, or force the executive branch to address specific issues of interest, rather than directly affect government policy. In the subcommittees of the Committee, there are quite often in-depth discussions, but, as one parliamentarian notes, since they have no operational authority, only in rare cases do they result in changes in thinking. This is especially true, in his view, since the executive branch does not like the legislature's challenge to its monopoly on expertise and decision-making. "The meetings are usually in the form of updates regarding what has already been decided, rather than an attempt to receive real inputs from the legislators in shaping decisions."<sup>4</sup>

The PM and the Defense Minister are generally careful not to compartmentalize the FADC from major issues since they understand that this can cause public blowback in the event of complications or failure. The updates are often given only to the Chairman of the Committee and are similar to those given to the Head of Opposition,<sup>5</sup>

or to the Intelligence subcommittee. On sensitive issues, there is often a dialogue between the security establishment and the Chairman and staff over what will be raised and in which forum.

The FADC is unusual among Knesset committees in that it has in the last decade a staff director and deputy as well as expert—as opposed to administrative—staff, with experts covering defense issues, the defense budget, foreign policy, and intelligence. The staff director and most of the experts are former officers or security officials; some of them come from the ranks of the Knesset's professional staff.

One criticism which has been levelled at the Committee is that since the same committee deals with defense and foreign affairs, the latter—while there is a subcommittee devoted to foreign policy and public diplomacy—is given short shrift. Suggestions to create a separate committee for Foreign Affairs are often raised, but have gained little traction so far.<sup>6</sup>

**Endnotes**

1 FADC, *Report*.

2 In addition, most of the senior figures of the coalition parties are ministers or deputy ministers, so their representation in Knesset committees in general is more junior.

3 Personal interview with author, December 2017.

4 Shelah, p. 225.

5 FADC, *Report*, p. 10.

6 See, e.g. Mitvim, *Strengthening Israel's*.

## EXTERNAL ACTORS

---

**N**on-governmental think tanks and research institutions serve an important role in other Western countries—especially in the United States—in developing policy-relevant expertise and knowledge outside government as well as alternative analysis and options for policy. They also serve as an incubator for civilian “competing elites” and a reservoir for talent in government. While a relatively large number of think tanks exist in Israel (67 according to the 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report) and sometimes they have influence in social and welfare

***The influence of Israeli think tanks in national security and foreign policy is debatable.***

issues, their impact and influence in the fields of national security and foreign policy—indeed, the penetration of their products into government circles—is debatable. Many Israeli

think tanks—especially non-university ones—are associated with one or a few major figures, often former senior officials, who use them as a platform for continued prestige and relevance to the national security debate. Almost all of the few relevant policy research institutes are heavily manned by former senior government and security officials.<sup>1</sup>

Hanna Elka Meyers attributes this dynamic to (a) the closed nature of Israeli electoral politics, which does not encourage legislators

to look outside for policy suggestions; (b) lack of informed political debate within Israel outside government, and (c) lack of funding, especially due to lack of government funding for outside research, the lack of major foundations which fund research, and a tax code which does not benefit nonprofit research institutes.<sup>2</sup> Almost all think tanks in Israel are clearly identifiable ideologically. Foreign donations, especially from wealthy Jewish donors and foreign (mostly European) governments and foundations, are the main source of funding for Israeli research institutes, and NGOs in general. This makes them even more suspect, and thus less relevant in the Israeli political system, where legislation has been passed requiring NGOs with foreign non-Jewish funding to publicize that fact.

Yoel Guzansky and Tamar Lindenstrauss opine that “the tendency [in Israel] to relate to many subjects as sensitive security matters somewhat limits [think tanks’] scope for influence. The dominant position of the security establishment in Israel, which also poses problems for the activities of the Foreign Ministry and the National Security Staff, restricts the space for think tanks.”<sup>3</sup> One senior Knesset staffer explained to me that Knesset Members, especially members of the FADC, use government experts or the Knesset’s well-regarded Research and Information Center—its “in-house think

tank”—when they wish to learn about issues.

Many of the research institutes in Israel are associated with universities. They are more interested in publishing academic works and largely refrain from policy-oriented analysis. Their primary interest is to serve the academic world and garner achievements there, and not to sustain public and policy discourse. There is tension between the desire to influence decision makers and the public discourse and the drive to write succinct, incisive, and relevant articles and reviews that will arouse public interest, while also retaining the respect of the academic/professional community.<sup>4</sup> There is a lack of desire among academics to enter the ranks of government for fear it will negatively affect their impartiality; similarly, the government does not strive to engage academia, at least in non-technical fields. Government and academia have a much more stand-offish relationship in Israel than in the United States, with each side assessing that it has little to learn from the other.

On the other hand, Israeli academics with relevant knowledge serve as reservists in AMAN or AGAT, or they have personal relationships with senior officers, officials, or elected politicians, which enables them to provide some expertise and advice on an informal level. One of the most significant functions of the leading think tanks—especially the Institute for National Security Studies and the Interdisciplinary Center’s Herzliya Conference—is to orchestrate prestigious yearly conferences which brings

researchers, politicians, decision makers, and financial and opinion leaders from Israel and abroad together for a “mingling” event, where senior figures give programmatic speeches and the “real work” is done in the lobby and at the receptions. In addition, think tanks in Israel, especially “progressive” ones, often serve to enable non-formal contacts between Israeli academics and former officials and representatives of Arab and other Islamic states, often in the context of what is termed “Track II diplomacy.” Indeed, some analysts say that in light of the political toxicity of the Palestinian issue in Israeli politics and the difficulty in developing novel thinking on this issue, think tanks can play a significant role.

***The “revolving door” between think tanks/ academia and government is almost nonexistent in Israel.***

The “revolving door” between think tanks/ academia and government, which is well known in the United States, is almost nonexistent in Israel. The number of senior figures who over the years of Israel’s existence have made the move from academia into senior government service is extremely small. They have almost all been appointed to the MFA or senior ambassadorships abroad.<sup>5</sup> Israel has a very limited tradition of political appointments in the national security field, so the ability of an outside expert—of which in any case there are not many—to penetrate into officialdom at higher than entry level, is not high.

FIGURE 3: THE ISRAELI NATIONAL SECURITY CONSTELLATION

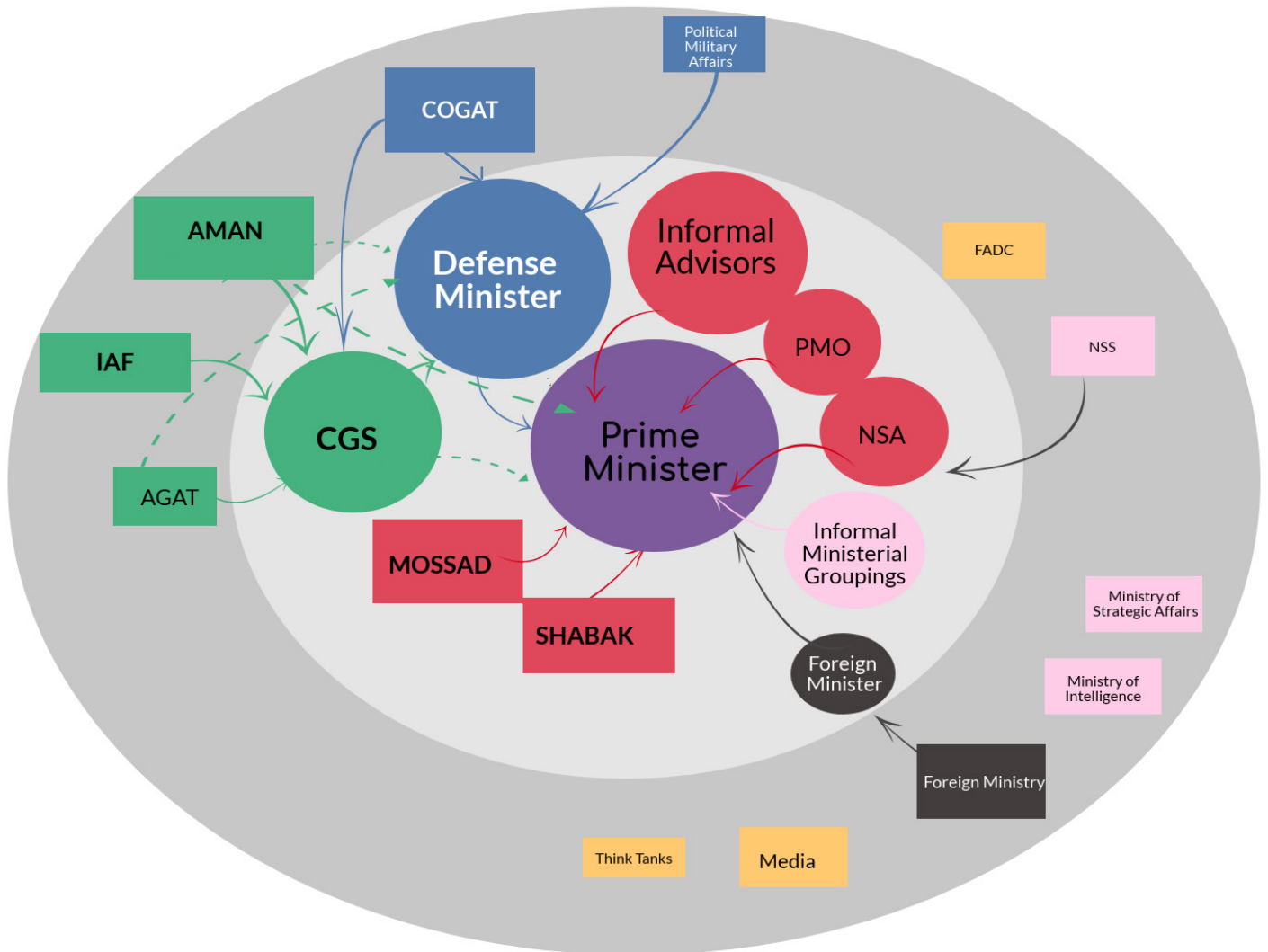


Figure 3: Proximity to the Prime Minister in the illustration reflects closeness to the PM. Arrows show how influence is exerted: directly, through channels, or obliquely (dotted lines). The size of the circle or rectangle shows their relative weight in the system. Circles represent individuals and rectangles, organizations.



Many observers note the deep-seated anti-intellectualism in Israeli strategic and political culture. Israeli strategic culture leans towards and admires action, bluntness, and dependence on personal connections, which leads to a concomitant skepticism and distaste for policy analysis. “Experts” who tend to see shades of grey and to focus on complexities and constraints rather than simply getting on with it have long been held in some contempt and accused of engaging in “philosophizing.”<sup>6</sup> Retired Major General and former NSA Yaakov Amidror said on this issue, “The IDF is an anti-intellectual army which almost doesn’t read, let alone write.”<sup>7</sup>

An additional characteristic of the Israeli system that is crucial to take note of is its open nature. Ben Meir notes that:

Being a small, even tiny, country, in which almost everyone knows almost everyone else, many leaders receive informal information from relatives and friends about what is ‘really going on,’ and in many instances will give more credence to such information than to painstakingly gathered intelligence estimates, based on hundreds of concrete bits of information.<sup>8</sup>

One former NSA notes that the PM hears ideas from many people: “everyone has access to the PM.” Politicians and officials in Israel are extremely interested in what appears in the press, especially the television news, radio, and the *Haaretz* newspaper.

The morning’s press reports often determine a large portion of the agenda of the bureaucracy in a given day. Several senior journalists and commentators are particularly influential among the political class and the senior officialdom. Politicians and senior officials also meet large numbers of foreign dignitaries, senior businessmen, and wealthy or influential Jews from abroad as well as old friends and comrades, who all provide them with “first-hand,” unfiltered information, which plays an important, not to say inordinate, part in their learning and decision-making processes.<sup>9</sup>

---

## Endnotes

1 Two Israeli think tanks are listed in the 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report's top 142 non-U.S. think tanks in the world: the Institute for National Security Studies (number 49) and the Began Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies (number 139). Both are also on the list of top Defense and National Security think tanks (numbers 16 and 70 out of 104); INSS is number 79 out of 135 in Top Foreign Policy and International Affairs Think Tanks. INSS, Israel's most well-known think tank specializing in national security and foreign affairs, is generally associated with the Centre-Left; its Director, Major General (ret.) Amos Yadlin, is a candidate for Defense Minister if the Labor Party forms a government in the future. Nineteen out of thirty-six executives and senior researchers listed at INSS are former senior military and intelligence officers. BESA is closer to the Likud line and has recently split, hiving off a second institute: the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies.

2 Hannah Elka Meyers, "Does Israel Need Think Tanks?," *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2009).

3 Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Foreign Policy Think Tanks and Decision Making Processes," *Strategic Assessment* (Tel Aviv: Institute of National Security Studies, July 2017).

4 Guzansky and Lindenstrauss, "Foreign Policy Think Tanks and Decision Making Processes."

5 The most notable examples were Shlomo Avineri and Dore Gold, who served as Directors General at the MFA, Itamar Rabinovich and Michael Oren, who served as Israel's Ambassador to the United States, and Dore Gold and Gabriella Shalev, who served as Ambassador to the United Nations.

6 Freilich, p. 55.

7 Quoted in Shelah, p. 218. In general, the number of Israeli officials and senior officers with doctoral degrees is quite low, though most have Master's degrees, often due to their attendance at War Colleges in Israel and abroad.

8 Ben Meir, p. 24.

9 The American parallel, again from Halperin (quoting George Kennan):

On countless occasions subordinates have been surprised and disappointed—sometimes even personally hurt—to find that the Secretary or the President has been more decisively influenced by some chance outside contact or experience than by the information and advice offered to him through the regular channels. Either he has talked with someone from outside whose statements seemed somehow simpler and more striking and appealing than anything he had heard from his own subordinates, or the same effect has been produced upon him by some newspaper or magazine article he read or by something he heard on the radio or saw on the news-reels or on television (p. 148).

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

---

A national security establishment is not only an organizational chart, where lines and boxes can be erased or added, and new levels placed. It is an artifact of its historical development, and an organic whole whose operations are a function of its structure, the people who man it, the political and strategic culture in which it functions, and their various interactions. All bureaucratic systems, and especially national security bureaucracies, are not created; they evolve. All such systems contain structures, vestiges and anomalies which are an artifact of the history of their

***The Israeli system does, most of the time, work.***

development and of the unique and changing political context in which they were formed over time—not of best

practice.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult, if not impossible, to change bureaucratic culture and standard operating procedures by fiat.

There is no ideal structure, no template, for making national security—or indeed, of any human organization—which would eliminate the shortcomings of a system and maximize the quality of its outputs. However, in national security, alongside the hoary adage “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” we can use the other, equally well-known “first, do no harm.” That is, the system is required to provide a very important public good at a satisfactory—

if not optimal—level at all times. This means that the burden of proof is on those who believe that more organized and “rational” systems, with attendant systemic upheavals, will result in better policy.

The Israeli national security system is far from perfect. But then again, so are all bureaucratic systems. The question is whether its problems are so bad, and the policy outputs that it produces are so sub-optimal, that it must be overhauled or significantly changed, and if so, how that can be done without producing serious new problems and unintended consequences. This calls for a correct identification of what is wrong, a correct diagnosis of what the identified shortcomings stem from, a correct selection of the tools of amelioration, and a correct implementation of those selected tools.

The many official reports and press articles written about the Israeli decision-making system, as well as the much fewer academic studies and officials’ memoirs, repeat several “truths” about Israeli decision-making, each of which should be tested in light of the previous analysis. Indeed, one of the main purposes of this study is to bring to the reader data with which he can examine this conventional wisdom:

- Israel is sorely lacking systematic, professional policy analysis and staff processes, leading to suboptimal policy-making, based on intuition and personal preferences. The obverse of this is that Israeli policy outputs would be improved by more organized and professional staff work.
- The political level, especially the PM and Cabinet, lack adequate staff structures and therefore are unable to fully carry out their duties in the national security realm.
- The IDF, and the defense establishment in general, are over-dominant in Israeli national security policy-making; some even claim that this leads to militarization of policy. The obverse of this is that Israeli policy-making should be civilianized by strengthening the decision-making capabilities and political and bureaucratic stature of the primary civilian national security organs.
- The political level of decision-making is dysfunctional, especially the Government and Cabinet, resulting in most decision-making being done in small, largely opaque, informal groups with the beliefs and preferences of the PM and the Defense Minister having an inordinate impact on decisions made.
- At the political level, policy-making is politicized, and the chaos of Israeli politics and the exigencies of coalition-building are reflected in national security

policy.

- There is a dearth of long-range planning in Israel, leading to “short-termism” in national security policy.
- The main official organs of policy often lack a “directive” from the top and therefore carry out their planning duties in a haze of uncertainty, attempting to divine what is needed and expected from them.

### *Formality and Flexibility in Strategic and Political Culture*

Regarding the first two points, one truth that seems self-evident but that bears repeating is that staff work and structures which are not viewed by the decision makers as helping them fulfill their missions and achieve their goals will not in the end be influential or even used. This is as true about democracies as about non-democratic systems. The most exquisitely structured and balanced system is not going to function well if the political level does not see benefit in using it fully, and attempting to compel them to do so is a recipe for disappointed expectations and for a disconnect—and gap—between form and function.

The Israeli system does, most of the time, work. It is difficult to say that its outputs—policies and decisions—are of an order of magnitude worse than those produced by larger and more intricate systems. One former NSA said that the Israeli decision-making process reflects the Israeli character. It is

less formalistic and “square,” and less bound by procedures: “In the past seventy years, it has produced on the whole reasonable decisions.” He is not convinced that better processes will result in better decisions. Two former Cabinet ministers interviewed said that “the processes determine less than the quality of the people;” one added, “Everything in the end is people and trust between people.”<sup>2</sup>

The system works, for a large part, because of islands of excellence, committed people, and the willingness to work together when necessary without paying too much attention

***The inherent struggle is between those who want to bureaucratize and those who want to keep the process fluid***

to bureaucratic boundaries.<sup>3</sup> They comprise a serving elite who go into government service not politics. These people provide stability and form a good structure/skeleton for decision-

making.<sup>4</sup> Within the bureaucracy are working-level interagency forums—both fixed and ad hoc—on specific geographic issues, usually including the components of the intelligence community and the MFA. There is much networking and cooperation among the subject matter experts throughout the bureaucracy. In addition, senior officers and officials in the various agencies often convene under their leadership ad hoc interagency meetings on specific issues of interest, as part of their learning process, to expose and air differences of opinion or in

an attempt to reach an intergovernmental consensus.

Much of the analysis and the prescriptions found in the literature, whether academic or official, especially the reports of various Committees of Inquiry and State Comptroller’s Reports, presents a formalistic-legalistic approach to decision-making in Israel. They stem from the thesis that a better, and specifically a more centralized and institutionalized, process will create better outcomes.<sup>5</sup> It seems they are leery of Israeli political culture and are guided by the assumption that what is missing is a formal, integrative structure close to the PM, which will serve—though they do not make this overt—as a “safe pair of hands.” These will serve to insulate the important issues of national security from the hurly burly of politics, from the influence of elected ministers—with a healthy disdain for professional politicians—and from populism. This is not a rare position for analysts of the problems of managing national security in democracies, but is one that often leads to the bruited of solutions which, while perhaps optimal, are politically unfeasible.<sup>6</sup> For instance, many of the problems in Israel’s national security decision-making are blamed on its electoral system, its system of coalition government, the increasingly personalized nature of its politics and disdain for expertise and for professionalism, and more specifically, its large and “leaky” Cabinet. Fixing these ills—if ills they are—is beyond the scope of national security studies.



The inherent struggle is that between those who want to bureaucratize, systematize, and civilianize the process and the decision makers who want to keep the process fluid, ambiguous, utile, and in their hands as well as the leaders of the more powerful bureaucratic players. The bureaucrats and the systematizers want to constrain and limit the influence of the elected officials on policy by creating organized and deliberate processes, believing that it would create better, and reproduceable, outcomes. The elected officials, for their part, want to ensure maximum freedom of maneuver and flexibility by collecting information from outside regular channels, using multiple advocacy within the system to generate knowledge and options, using small groups of trusted advisors for delicate issues, playing their cards close to their chests,<sup>7</sup> and pushing off decisions until the last moment possible. In the Israeli context, this inclination is made much stronger by the fact that the Prime and Defense Ministers often have much more knowledge and experience in the key issues of national security than do their staff members and officials. A former NSA said that “the system exists in order to serve the politicians; it sometimes becomes confused and thinks the opposite.”<sup>8</sup> This dovetails with what Freilich terms the most controversial finding of his book:

In Israel’s system of coalition-cabinet government, systematic policy planning – that is, formulation and consideration of alternative policy objectives, priorities and options – is often

inimical, at times diametrically opposed, to the [PM]’s political needs . . . by elucidating objectives, priorities and options, policy planning forces [PM]s to confront issues and choices that they may not want to deal with, politically or substantively. . . . Ambiguity can be constructive and rather than augmenting a [PM]’s range of options, systematic policy planning may greatly curtail it or even threaten his political career.<sup>9</sup>

So here arises an interesting “the chicken or the egg” question: is the lack of coordinated integrated staff work a cause of the lack of long-range strategic planning and thinking in Israel, or the result of such a lack? Would better structures and processes lead to better policies? The answer would appear to be that the disinclination to work solely, or even largely, within formal bureaucratic structures, the preference for a more fluid, informal and multi-channel policy-making process, and the lack of capacity and indeed appetite for long-range planning all stem from deeper aspects of political and strategic culture in Israel. The organizational structure and processes of the Israeli system are more a reflection of these cultures than a cause of them.

### *The “Dominance” of the IDF*

Regarding the dominance of the IDF and the security establishment, the basic fact of the Israeli national security bureaucracy is that after 70 years since state’s founding and over 40 years of intensive discussion of the reforms necessary, most organizations

and even ministries in Israel, do not have the capacity or the ability to perform staff work.

One observation common to almost all who have worked in the Israeli system and counterintuitive to academic observers, especially in the West, is that dominance of the military in the process doesn't lead to more violent or extreme outcomes, though it may well lead to more conservative ones. The military and security apparatuses comprise a wide range of ideology, and the process of friction with rivals often leads to a more moderate and nuanced attitude towards them. The IDF is often a voice for moderation, stressing the importance of diplomatic rather than military options and is often the restraining element, facing a political establishment which at times criticizes it for hesitancy and conservatism.<sup>10</sup> This is recognized by Israel's strategic interlocutors and leads occasionally to officials of friendly countries and allies trying to encourage the IDF to play a "responsible"

***The IDF is often a voice for moderation, stressing the importance of diplomatic rather than military importance.***

and restraining role vis-à-vis the political level.

The IDF is also a player much less monolithic than it appears. The professional officers in the IDF Intelligence and Planning Directorates can be more correctly seen as "bureaucrats in

uniform," with rather more in common with other analysts and planners than with line officers. They don't necessarily partake in

the same institutional ethos of the "fighting" IDF, but have developed an ethos and professional ethic of their own. The security establishment has developed in such a way that many of the functions normally fulfilled by their civilian counterparts are expressed within it, and it has developed organs which replicate both the functions and the roles of the missing or irrelevant civilian bodies. It should be noted that many of the officers in AMAN and AGAT are young, not very worldly, and often lack substantive expertise on their areas of research (and language knowledge) and experience abroad. These, combined with the rapid turnover and short tours among IDF officers, limit their development of in-depth expertise—though not their confidence. This makes them less informed and attuned than officers of the MFA or Mossad, who as one experienced diplomat says, "Have real life experience as opposed to expertise obtained from a computer screen," or even the politicians.<sup>11</sup> PMs Peres and Rabin both noted that experienced statesmen possess much more insight in assessing intentions and situations than do young intelligence officers, and therefore preferred to read raw intelligence than to receive finished analytical products.

To the extent that the IDF strategic level can be said to have a political—to differentiate from partisan—orientation or culture, it can be said, in the past thirty years at least, to be moderate. The IDF is not an ideological army, it is a largely conscript and reserve force which encompasses most of the spectrum of political belief found within Jewish Israeli

society. In most of the major strategic decisions made in Israel since its inception, there were senior serving and reserve military officers supporting both sides of the argument. Its strategic level largely shows an instinctive recoiling from the use of military force to achieve non-consensus political goals and from bombastic or openly ideological rhetoric, especially regarding territorial aggrandizement or disdain for Israel's enemies and rivals.

As in many issues discussed in this paper, there is less to the “dominance” by the military of the Israeli national security discourse and process than meets the eye. The preeminence of the IDF in the staff and policy analysis processes does not mean that Israeli policy is militarized and does not mean that the IDF in the end makes national security policy. While the IDF and the security establishment have an outsized role in the staff work and in producing the inputs that are meant to shape policy, they are not omnipotent, and the PM often makes decisions contrary to their preferences. It is unquestionably true, however, that when the decisions made are not based on IDF proposals and staff work, or on those of the other security services, as is often—perhaps even usually—the case, they are often less thoroughly prepared.<sup>12</sup> In many cases, the detailed staff work began only after the decision was already made by the PM.

#### *The Lack of a Competing (Civilian) Policy Elite*

All things being equal, a more systematized,

civilianized process—with better analysis of options and long-range planning—is indubitably better than one which is less so. But while turning the system into a more “civilian” one is certainly a worthwhile goal, is there really a civilian cadre today in Israel who can take up these cudgels? Unlike other Western countries, true civilian national security expertise scarcely exists in Israel outside government.

***There is less “dominance” by the military of the Israeli national security discourse than meets the eye.***

This may well be a result of 60+ years of neglect and even intentional obstruction, but it is nevertheless a fact. There is of course, substantial expertise within Mossad and Shabak, whose personnel are civilians and do to a large extent have a different mentality than the military, but it is largely specialized: their role is quite significant in the specific areas where they participate. As noted, the NSS itself, as well as the MOD Politico-Military Bureau and even the few think tanks in Israel, are overwhelmingly manned by former senior military and intelligence officers. It is important to point out, of course, that even veterans of the security establishment and military, once they leave their organizations, can often hold views counter to those of their organizations or adopt a different and wider view. Still, there is less here than meets the eye. There is no “competing elite” in the American sense, so that the top, and even the middle, of the bureaucracy can change markedly when the

government changes. The most significant civilian organization, the MFA, while its lack of influence has been decried and discussed for over 40 years, has hardly ever been allowed or able to position itself as a strong

**Unlike in other Western countries, true civilian national security expertise scarcely exists in Israel outside government.**

actor in this field and is unable to compete in many key areas. Many of the civilians involved in the policy-making apparatus, who are not former military and security personnel, enter through the political

and/or personal side of the PM and other ministers' offices. They are rarely substantive experts in the foreign and defense policy fields, but often come from the party-political, journalistic, or ideological milieus.<sup>13</sup>

A more profound contributor to the quality of national security decisions than the bureaucracy is the top level of political leadership. As one former Cabinet Minister told me, "If you have good leadership, you don't need a national security staff. If you have incompetent leadership, then a national security staff won't help. It is most important when the leaders are average and need the help."<sup>14</sup> The crisis of political leadership in Israel leads to the fact that it is harder and harder to elect the kind of politicians needed to run the system well. This places on the shoulders of the bureaucracy responsibilities that it should not need to bear. And as noted before, this is not a problem than can be addressed with legislation and organizational

tinkering.

### *Whether to Change, What to Change, and How?*

All this is not to say that organizational reform and change is unneeded or impossible, though it is difficult. Change can come when there is broad agreement that it is necessary due to obvious failures or changes to the external or internal political environments. It can also happen when the existing bureaucratic players are weak and/or discredited. It is no coincidence that the few major changes which have occurred in the Israeli national security apparatus were after the Yom Kippur War, when the military leadership—especially that of AMAN—was discredited and in practice cashiered, and after the Second Lebanon War, which was widely seen in the Israeli public and elites as a failure, especially of the Cabinet and the senior military leadership.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, there was an official commission of inquiry whose recommendations were largely accepted. Failures and Committees of Inquiry bring the participants in the system to understand flaws, cause limited paradigm shifts, and can be a catalyst for improvements: every major institutional or conceptual change in the Israeli national security establishment came about from a crisis. But the correct diagnoses weren't always given, so the wrong faults were treated. Ideally, the change should make things better by actually solving the real problems, and not inadvertently give rise to other problems. Creating the NSS, for instance, may seem

like a modern and Western innovation and on the surface improve integration and top-down control in the process; the question is whether it actually does so in a significant manner and whether it brings significant added value.

Not everything that is not pretty doesn't work, and not everything that is imperfect needs to be replaced or overhauled. In any case, prescriptions which envision a change in the Israeli political system and/or political culture—such as those which posit a dramatic change in the behavior of elected political actors (such as the suggestion that Cabinet members should learn more about the issues they are called to address)—in order to solve the problems of the Israeli decision-making process are irrelevant.

The situation described above is not so very different from that seen in other democratic countries. Have the policy outcomes created by the Israeli system been so much worse than those of the more organized

systems some of the reformists so admire? Israeli reformists compare Israel to an ideal—specifically, that of the United States and the United Kingdom—which the citizens and officials of those countries would not likely recognize; it falls short of an imaginary ideal. The push for the creation of an Israeli national security council was and is, not to a small degree, a product of “Americanitis:” the desire by many Israelis to emulate structures and processes in the United States, based on a romanticized view of their utility and effectiveness even in the American system, and without taking into account the vast differences between the two political systems and political cultures. The wish to formalize and systematize Israeli decision-making stems, in large part, from a wish to tame Israeli political culture and make it more “Western.”<sup>16</sup> This comes at a time when politics in key Western countries is coming to more resemble the hyper-partisan, other-negating, personalized political culture of Israel. 🌐

---

## Endnotes

1 A rational process would not necessarily, for example, create a U.S. defense establishment based on four separate and largely autonomous armed services.

2 Personal interviews with the author, December 2017. Ben Meir, less optimistically, in 1983 explained why the Israeli system is the way it is: fear of leaks, emotionally charged political atmosphere in Israel, national ethos of improvisation, lack of a civil service tradition and general suspicion of experts, exaggerated self-confidence, and past success. (pp. 92-93).

3 In this context, it is worth noting Halperin's observation that

the attention focused on alternative NSC systems . . . tends to obscure the fact that most business is conducted outside of those systems. There always are other procedures for handling routine matters, even those that come before the president, and crises tend to be treated in different ways whether or not a formal system exists. . . . Some writers have argued that procedures make no difference—the participants and the setting determine what decisions are made. Procedures indeed are less important than shared images, the interests of the participants, and their power. Nevertheless procedures can make some difference. . . . Organization cannot make a genius out of an



incompetent; even less can it, of itself, make the decisions which are required to trigger necessary action. On the other hand, disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can easily lead to disaster (p. 106).

4 Alongside his critical view of much of Israeli decision-making, Freilich (p. 74) notes strengths: (a) the ability to change gears and rapidly and creatively adapt to new circumstances; (b) pragmatic and non-ideological decision-making, as opposed to rhetoric; (c) a small, tightly-knit establishment, with ease of communications within it; (d) a limited range of issues, with a comparatively high degree of expertise; (e) judicial, media and public review; and (g) high motivation and quality of people and "centers of operational excellence" (especially the intelligence agencies, Planning Directorate, and Air Force).

5 Arad quotes (p. 49) the 1983 Kahan Committee: "While experience and intuition are of great worth, it is preferable that these not be the only basis on which decisions are made." Freilich notes that the outcomes of Israeli policy-making over the years have been reasonable, but explains: "Israel has often succeeded despite its decision-making process, not because of it. . . . Flawed processes can at times result in positive outcomes, while good processes do not ensure success. . . . Nevertheless, both the academic literature and the experience of nations around the world indicate that 'better' processes will at least diminish the likelihood of failure" (pp. 244, 7).

6 The call for systematization and institutionalization of processes seems to come most often from representatives of organs which feel themselves marginalized (NSS, MFA, and the Knesset).

7 One oft-remarked and criticized tendency of Israeli policy-makers and senior officials is to communicate and make decisions orally, without a written record. One former NSA said that "everything in Israel is informal." In his view, Prime Ministers do not want things to be documented because they "do not like - actually, fear - being 'caught out.'"

8 Personal interview with the author, December 2017.

9 Freilich, p 233.

10 Peretz, "The True Center Party," a keen and critical observer of the Israeli political scene, states:

Here we can identify the IDF . . . as a kind of central party: [an] organization that exert power, force and cruelty at times, but also understand the limitations of power, and know how to stop frenzied politicians and save them from themselves, even when the price is accusations of leftism. We saw this in the Iranian issue, when the heads of the Mossad, the Shin Bet and the IDF all preferred diplomatic steps to a military operation which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak sought (at least in their statements) ... [the security figures reportedly even brought in the United States to buttress their stand, and the confrontation ended with the political level backing down].

Interestingly, recent research indicates that a two thirds majority of the public approves of the restraint that the top-ranking military echelon exerts on the government, in relation to deploying military force and imposing restrictions on the Palestinian public in the West Bank. See, Zipi Israeli, *National Security Index: Public Opinion Survey 2017-2018*, INSS, <http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Survey-2017-2018.pdf>.

11 Personal interviews with author, December 2017.

12 A partial list of those significant decisions made contrary to the position of the IDF leadership would be the withdrawal from Sinai in 1957, the Israeli response to President Sadat's overtures in 1977, the 1981 attack on the Iraqi reactor, the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, and the disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005.

13 A perhaps promising development in this context is the creation in the past decade or so of graduate-level programs in national security studies and in diplomacy in most Israeli universities. While a great many of the students in these programs are mid-level security establishment professionals seeking to burnish their credentials, there are younger students from outside the system or from its lower levels, who may help form a cadre of civilian specialists for the future.

14 Personal interview with author, December 2017.

15 The Defense Minister and CGS left office soon afterward.

16 Two other examples would be the failed experiment at direct election of the PM between 1996-2001, and the move to primary elections in the major parties, which have to an extent strengthened figures on their extremes.







FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
1528 WALNUT ST, SUITE 610  
PHILADELPHIA, PA 19102