The 'Religionizing' of the Israel Defence Force: Its Impact on Military Culture and Professionalism

By Ze'ev Drory

Many studies have examined civil-military relations from different research perspectives and a range of disciplines. The political science and sociological approaches have focused chiefly on the hierarchical relationship that crystallized over time between political echelons and military command. Some explored the degree of militarization in nations and societies, where the military played a pivotal role in civilian spheres that are not by nature its field of operations. Others have attempted to investigate a society's level of mobilizing around its security needs, and coined the concept of "garrison State" – a label often used in connection with the Israeli State and the way of life of its society and citizens. Another field of study draws on sociology to examine the implications of military service on social stratification, and the societal and ethnic divides within Israeli society.[1]

In recent years, the steep increase in the number of Israel Defence Force (IDF) officers wearing the "knitted-skullcap" (a term that refers to the group variously defined, in Hebrew, as Modern Orthodox, National-Religious, Religious Zionists, or Settlers) has raised important issues for civil-military relations and for religion's place as a unifying or divisive factor within the military. The key questions from the perspective of civil-military relations focus (a) on the manner by which the military leadership obeys the directives of democratically elected decision-makers rather than of actors outside the political system[2];

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[1] Below is a partial list only of the numerous publications dealing with the complex relationship between the Israel Defense Force (IDF) and its parent society, and its implications for stratification and immigrant absorption in Israel: Z, Ostfeld, *An Army Born*, Ministry of Defense, 1994 ; U. Ben-Eliezer, *The Emergence of Israeli Militarism, 1936-1956*, Tel Aviv, Dvir, 1995 ; Z. Drory, *Utopia in Uniform,* Ben-Gurion Center, 2000 ; D. Horowitz. & M. Lissak., *From Settlement to State,* Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1977 ; M. Lissak "The Israel Defense Force as an Agent of Socialization and Education : A Research in Role Expansion in Democratic Society", in M.R. Van Gils (ed.), *The Perceived Role of the Military*, Rotterdam University Press, Rotterdam 1972 ; D. Horowitz & M. Lissak., *Trouble in Utopia* : *The Overburdened Polity of Israel,* Albany, State University of New York Press, 1989 ; D. Cohen, *The Policy of Absorption during the Period of Mass Immigration, 1948-1953*, doctoral dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 1985 ; Z. Zameret, *Days of the Melting Pot*, Sede Boqer Campus, Ben-Gurion Research Center, 1993 ; R. Gal & L. Tamir (eds.), *Between the Yarmulke and the Beret, Religion, Politics and the Military in Israel*, The Dan Shomron Center for Society, Security and Peace, Kinneret Academic College, Ben-Shemen, Modan Publishing, 2012 ; V. Azarya B. Kimmerling, "New Immigrants in the Israeli Armed Forces", *Armed Forces & Society*, vol.6, n°3, 1980 ; T. Bowden, *Army in the Service of the State*, Tel-Aviv University Publishing Projects, 1976. ; B. Halpern, "The Role of the Military in Israel", in J.J. Johnson (ed.), *The Role of the Military in: Underdeveloped Countries*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1962 ; D. Horowitz, "Is Israel a Garrison State?", *Jerusalem Quarterly*, vol.4, Summer 1977 ; M. Lissak, "The Civilian Components of Israel's Security Doctrine : The Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in the First Decade", in I. Troen & N. Lucas (eds.), *Israel – The First Decade of Independence*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995: E. Luttwak & D. Horowitz, , *The Israeli Army*, London, A. Lane, 1974 ; Y. Ben-Meir, *Civil-Military Relations in Israel*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995 ; S. Cohen, *The Sword and the Scroll?,* London, Harwood Academic Press, 1997.

[2] Stuart A. Cohen, "From Integration to Segregation : The Role of Religion in the IDF", *Armed Forces & Society,* vol.35, n°3, 1999, pp.387-405 ; same author, *Divine Service? Judaism and Israel's Armed Forces*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013.

and (b) on the degree to which the armed forces maintain their professional autonomy when it comes to operational decisions.[3]

Israel seems an especially suitable case for examining these issues. Young people from the National-Religious community have filled the vacuum created by dwindling motivation to join the military among other population groups, and have replaced members of the kibbutz movement in volunteering for combat roles and command courses in the IDF. The contribution made by the young National-Religious people in filling the ranks of the IDF's combat array and command backbone is undeniable. And yet, harsh claims are being made about the serious damage caused to the military's organizational culture, and the political and sectarian impacts of decision-making in the IDF.[4] The issue is now being explored in the country through the prism of the Army's unity and apolitical character – two principles that have always been integral to the IDF since it was established. Since statehood and the IDF's inception, the ties between religion, politics, and the military have been the object of disputes and political bargaining. When right-wing movements and the religious bloc entered the government in the 1970's, the religious-ideological-political divide widened in Israeli society. The evacuation of South and North Sinai, the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, and the attempts to evacuate illegal outposts in the West Bank sparked off tension and violent conflicts between the IDF and the settlers. More recently, particularly since the disengagement, incidents have increased in which National-Religious soldiers confront the question of accepting authority and discipline – should they listen to their commanders, or their rabbis?

Cases of refusal to obey orders have damaged the IDF's discipline and command authority. Commanders in the field frequently opt for compromise to avoid conflict with their senior commanders and avert possible political and institutional consequences. Though they do not admit it, IDF commanders are aware of the threat posed by the religionization process to the IDF's functional capacity. The process intensified with the widening role of the Chief Military Rabbinate under the command of Brigadier-General Avichai Rontzki, the Chief Military Rabbi from 2006 to 2010, who was accused of invading the spheres of education, heritage, and leadership in IDF units. Rontzki remarked:

> It's a battle for the character of Israeli society – no less. The question is whether it will become a Jewish national army – by which I mean a religious one (…) or an army of the State and of all its citizens.[5]

The IDF's religionizing is part of the changes that have occurred in Israeli society over the past 25 years, and have undermined basic assumptions regarding civil-military

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[3] Stuart A. Cohen, *The Scroll or the Sword? Dilemmas of Religion and Military Service in Israel*, Amsterdam, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.

[4] A.R. Hoffman, "The knitted officers in loyalty test", *Yediot Aharonot*, 15 September 2010. The article drew on statistics presented at the conference "Religious and Secular Soldiers: The Challenge", held jointly by the Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University and the Dan Shomron Center for Society, Security and Peace at the Kinneret College. A survey conducted ahead of the conference showed that a third of the respondents thought that many, or very many, religious officers and commanders would refuse to obey orders to evacuate settlements and outposts in the West Bank.

[5] A. Magnezi & K. Nachson. "General reserved : Elazar Shteren attacked the departure letter of the leaving IDF Manpower Chief Director", *Ynet*, 20 July 2011 (Hebrew).