

OFER SHELAH

# National Security Decisionmaking Processes in Israel

## Persistent Flaws and How to Amend Them

“The Lord is my shepherd,” says the Book of Psalms, and fortunate this is, for the decision-making process in Israel is deeply flawed.  
Charles D. Freilich, *Zion’s Dilemma*

**T**he discussion over how Israel should make its major defense and foreign relations decisions is as old as Israel itself. Israel is a state born in a storm—having been invaded the day after its declaration of independence by the armies of all its neighbors—and in many ways has remained in that storm ever since. Its government’s defense spending, including military and nonmilitary security organizations, accounts for a substantial portion of the total government budget, and security issues are, as a matter of course, headline news items.

Discussion has intensified in recent years because of changes in Israeli society; security threats faced; and, most of all, the evolving nature of military clashes: Israel has not fought a major war against a neighboring army in close to 40 years. Past conflicts were asymmetrical and waged against nonstate organizations. In these campaigns, the desirable outcome was a matter of debate, even as the fighting was

going on; what took place in meetings between political leaders and generals assumed more importance than what happened on the battlefield. This, in turn, intensified the debate about Israel’s security decisionmaking process.

## The Basic Laws of Israel

Basic Law: The Military states that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF, or “the army,” in common Israeli parlance) is “(a) subject to the authority of the Government” and that “(b) the Minister in charge of the army on behalf of the Government is the Minister of Defense” (Basic Law: The Military, 1976, Article 2).<sup>1</sup> In practice, this meant that all major wartime decisions, from calling reserve forces to duty to the decision to conquer the Golan Heights in the 1967 Six-Day War, were made by the cabinet with the Minister of Defense in charge of implementation.

Beginning with Golda Meir, Israeli prime ministers (PMs) have convened smaller informal ministerial groups

that act as de facto security cabinets (SCs). In Meir’s time, this was known as “Golda’s kitchen,” emphasizing the informal nature of the discussions held by its members (“Golda Meir,” 2022). Major decisions still must be ratified by the full cabinet. Not until 2001 was the Ministers Committee for Security and Foreign Relations Matters, commonly known as the “security cabinet,” instituted by law (Basic Law: The Government, 2001a, Article 6a).

More importantly, until 1999 neither the full cabinet nor the SC had at its disposal a special staff organization to support more-informed deliberation for better decision-making. The role of this staff—first called the National Security Council (NSC) and, since 2008, the National Security Staff (NSS), which in Hebrew the letters for both acronyms are the same and so both are referred to as “Malal”)—will be examined extensively in this paper.

Various national commissions of inquiry, formed after protests about the management of major military clashes, referred to this problem of staffing as did the State Comptroller’s Office in several reports. The Agranat Commission, formed after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, recommended that the PM should have an “intelligence advisor.” The recommendations of the Winograd Commission, formed after the 2006 Second Lebanon War (LWII), led to a change in the nature and role of the NSC.

Unfortunately, these structural changes did very little to better Israel’s decisionmaking process—even as changing security challenges prompted an improved apparatus for the discussion of such matters. It is the purpose of this paper to explain why and suggest more-effective strategies for future decisionmaking.

### Abbreviations

IDF	Israel Defense Forces
LWII	Second Lebanon War
MG	Major General
MK	member of the Knesset
MOU	memorandum of understanding
NSC	National Security Council
NSS	National Security Staff
PM	prime minister
SC	security cabinet

## The Israeli Public's Views on Security and the Israel Defense Forces

Despite many changes in Israeli society over the years, and many instances in which the IDF was dragged into the political fray, the army remains the most trusted and revered state organization, by a large margin—especially compared with Israel's political system and government. In 2020, 82 percent of the Israeli Jewish population expressed trust in the IDF (this itself was a 9-percent decrease from a previous poll), while 27 percent of this population expressed similar trust in the government and 17 percent in political parties—a situation of which politicians are acutely aware (Hermann et al., 2020, p. 53).

The IDF is a “people's army” with an understandable need for public support. Former Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon once told this author that he relented to the IDF's budgetary demands because “my mother told me never to be against our soldiers.”<sup>2</sup> Kahlon, an experienced politician, was realistically reflecting his likely support in any conflict with the army. This asymmetry has also engendered the need for the Israeli public to feel that “the people up there” know what they are doing in security matters. The performance of most defense ministers has been rated in polls much higher than that of their fellow ministers, and approval ratings for the chief of staff and the IDF in general are usually even higher.<sup>3</sup>

Failures or inconclusive results of military operations are often attributed by the public to bad decisions by politicians rather than poor performance by the troops, and the popular expression “let the IDF win” is frequent in public discussion, implying that Israeli troops could win any

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battle if not constrained by politicians. This situation tilts power relationships in favor of the military.

What could ensue, and in several notable cases has, is a mutual comfort zone. If the IDF characterizes the situation and alternatives for action (making clear its preferred option), this removes responsibility from politicians' shoulders who can claim that the IDF received what it asked for. The generals, in turn, are careful not to demand action that could push the political leaders out of their desired ambiguous role and make the IDF responsible should the action fail. Thus, the IDF can claim that it carried out whatever the leadership decided.

All of this, while understandable on the human level, can lead to poor policymaking, introducing troubling issues of personal politics and interagency process. The record shows this is all too often a recipe for mediocre decisionmaking.<sup>4</sup>

## The Security Cabinet

Basic Law: The Government stipulates that the SC should include no more than half the number of ministers in the full government cabinet. Some ministers are SC members ex officio: the PM (its chairman), the deputy PM, and the ministers for Defense, Justice, Foreign Affairs, Internal Security, and Finance (Basic Law: The Government, 2001a, Article 6a).<sup>5</sup> This composition presents the first serious problem: SC members are, by the nature of their primary ministry portfolios, already exceedingly busy usually serving as members of the Knesset (MKs), which requires them to spend long hours legislating. Many SC members are also party leaders, given the coalition nature of Israeli governments, and as such burdened with political pressures.

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Ministers are almost always professional politicians who, with several notable exceptions, have minimal knowledge of the substance of their assigned office or of security matters. The Winograd Commission (2008, p. 298) dryly commented that

the quality of the decision-making by the political echelon is largely dependent on the depth and width of their knowledge in these matters. In the 2006 Lebanon campaign some of the central decision-makers lacked such knowledge. This is a private case of a larger issue, concerning the decision-making process and the knowledge base of political echelon decision-makers.

Yet, no party leader would give up the prestige of being an SC member regardless of the level of their expertise, or lack thereof, in security matters. Political pressure dictates that membership will almost always be the maximum allowed by law: half of all government ministers, which amounted to as many as 28 in recent coalitions (“Thirty-Sixth Government of Israel,” 2022). Nonmembers, applying pressure on their leaders, were admitted as “observers” and allowed to participate in discussion but not to vote.

This makes for a room crowded with people possessing little knowledge of security matters and few options for learning on the job.<sup>6</sup> Many PMs, in turn, treat SC discussions as a necessary formality and enter with suggestions that have already been decided with the defense minister and military leadership. The SC discussion often turns political rather than professional, with everyone speaking for the record.<sup>7</sup>

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Insufficient knowledge among ministers, together with deficient preparatory work anywhere but among IDF staff, makes for the near-complete dominance of uniformed officials in painting the picture of what is going on and in presenting alternatives.

Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in a conversation with this author, said,

The question of how much [I] trust the [SC] is a tough one. Did I value the judgment of every [SC] member? No. Did I trust them completely? Hardly. Is this reason enough not to disclose to them, at the relevant time, what they need to know in order to reach a decision? No. But I was sure I could lead the [SC] toward any position which I deemed relevant. In all of my political life, I can't recall a single critical decision in which the [SC] did not follow the prime minister.<sup>8</sup>

In the words of Avigdor Lieberman, the former foreign minister and current finance minister, to the state comptroller after Operation Protective Edge, SC discussion “serves mostly for ventilation . . . there is no agenda, and it is unclear what's the purpose of the discussion” (State Comptroller of Israel, 2018, p. 27). In this author's view, the post-Netanyahu-Bennet-Lapid government showed few signs of improvement on this score.

### **The Dominance of the Israel Defense Forces**

Insufficient knowledge among ministers, together with deficient preparatory work anywhere but among IDF staff, makes for the near-complete dominance of uniformed officials in painting the picture of what is going on and in presenting alternatives. This is as true for approving proposed military action as for framing budget proposals. Staff work is done by IDF officers, concluded by the general staff, approved by the PM and/or defense minister, and presented to the cabinet as a *fait accompli*. This stems from the PM's Office being practically devoid of independent staff capabilities while the Defense Ministry relies almost exclusively on the IDF.

The deficiencies of the PM's Office were described by Benjamin Netanyahu, the PM who created the first NSC, when asked by the Winograd Commission about a decisionmaking apparatus:

[W]ithin my office, the main factors were the military secretary (a uniformed general) . . . and my

policy advisor . . . I thought it absurd that in the State of Israel, in the Prime Minister's office, inside your chamber you actually lack any tools . . . and are completely dependent on the good or not-so-good recommendations of the security establishment . . . you have no independent tools to examine things. (Arad and Ben-Har, 2016, p. 74)

The same applies to the Defense Ministry. The defense minister ostensibly represents the government's authority over the IDF as stated in Article 2 of Basic Law: The Military (1976). In fact, the Defense Ministry has little capability of its own and relies on serving officers for almost all analytic support. For example, the head of the ministry's financial department is the same person acting as the financial advisor to the chief of staff, a brigadier general. The planning department is the IDF's planning wing, headed and staffed by army officers.

Often the IDF plans, chooses alternatives, and presents them to the defense minister, who in turn represents the army's position to the SC. The power and influence of the Foreign Ministry are minor compared with those of the security establishment, and its representation in SC discussions is negligible.<sup>9</sup>

This situation is exacerbated by the prominence of former senior officers in Israeli politics in general and, particularly, in the SC. They possess more relevant background knowledge than other ministers, but they also show loyalty to current personnel in the IDF or tend to defend positions that they had upheld during their service. Over the past 40 years, the defense minister was most often a former general, including five former chiefs of staff.<sup>10</sup> Many more former generals have served as SC members. They were accustomed to the IDF leading the discussion and generally tended to support the IDF position.

Army officers appearing before the SC often view the discussion as political and shallow—and act accordingly. In private conversations, senior officers admitted to the author that they have often kept relevant information to a minimum—not because they had something to hide but because they felt that the ministers do not really want to know more. “They are happy with a pro forma discussion and comfortably approving whatever the PM wants,” said one officer, who even named a chief of staff who ordered that the SC presentations “should not be more than one-page long.”<sup>11</sup> Some further examples will illustrate the SC inefficacy as a decisionmaking body.

On August 9, 2006, the SC, headed by then-Prime Minister Olmert, met to deliberate the final operation in LWII. The chief of staff at that time, Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, sought approval for the IDF's plan for a ground operation in Lebanon. The previous day, Halutz had refused the PM office's request to present two alternatives to the SC—the other option being a plan based on an idea presented to the PM by Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz (Shelah and Limor, 2007, pp. 304–316).<sup>12</sup> This refusal was in itself an apparent violation of the stipulation by law that “the army is subject to the authority of the Government” (Basic Law: The Military, 1976, Article 2). Instead, Halutz stated to the SC that there was no option other than the one presented by the IDF: “You must approve it wholly; we will not do half or a quarter of it,” he warned, “and you must do it now” (Shelah and Limor, 2007, p. 307).

Entering the room, ten of the 12 SC members thought there was a better alternative (although they did not agree on what that alternative was). But Prime Minister Olmert, knowing that the public's interpretation of not approving the IDF's plan would be that the politicians had prevented

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the army from winning the war, sent some SC members notes asking them not to oppose the IDF's position—even though he preferred the unrepresented Mofaz alternative. “We can't refuse to accept the army's position,” Olmert wrote Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. “If we do, we risk a confrontation with them, and they don't have an alternative plan” (Shelah and Limor, 2007, p. 313). In the final vote, nine of 12 SC members approved the IDF plan, and the other three abstained (Shelah and Limor, 2007, p. 315).

In hindsight, Olmert saw things a little differently:

In time I became disillusioned with many of the myths regarding the judgment, wisdom, and depth of understanding of IDF officials, standing as they were at the heart of the decisionmaking process. This happened when I was prime minister, saw them up close, and became quite worried about these things. I still am.<sup>13</sup>

Although other PMs expressed similar misgivings behind closed doors, very little has changed in this matter.

Halutz paid dearly for his blunt insistence on what the SC should decide, especially because the approved operation was later deemed a failure. He resigned from office the

following year after being severely criticized by the Winograd Commission. The chiefs of staff who followed him took away from that incident the lesson that it is best to be passive during the decision process: In the series of operations in Gaza from 2009 (Cast Lead), 2012 (Pillar of Cloud), 2014 (Protective Edge), and 2021 (Keeper of the Walls), military leaders avoided expressing their views and positions, remaining in the comfortable position of loyal public servants who carry out any decision made by the ministers.

What the IDF really wanted, usually previously agreed to with the PM, was conveyed through the information and alternatives that they developed and presented to the SC. As former SC member Yitzhak Aharonowitz told the State Comptroller's Office, “It's tough for [SC] members to reach any decision other than the one recommended by the army, because they have little prior knowledge and because of the way the IDF presents the options which always leads to the one they prefer” (State Comptroller of Israel, 2018, p. 37). A former SC member suggests that “The IDF always presents three alternatives: the first is high-risk, high-reward; the second is low risk, little or no reward; the third is what they really want. I used to tell them—start with the third.”<sup>14</sup>

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Lack of knowledge and preparation within the SC is made worse by the fact that the SC is almost always convened to make an operative or budgetary decision but rarely to discuss options and possibilities regarding issues that would likely need to be addressed in the future.

These factors have often turned SC discussions into political debates, providing speeches for the record—and leaks, even in real time, from what is supposed to be one of the most secretive government bodies. This was illustrated during Cast Lead with a leak from a purportedly top-secret IDF presentation that claimed conquering the Gaza Strip would result in “hundreds of KIAs [killed in action] among IDF troops” (Segal, 2014). The leaked content made it clear that the IDF was reluctant to carry out a major land operation and having its presumed steep price aired on television put the decisionmaking onus on the SC members. The leak (which some attributed to the PM’s Office) helped to weaken the Israeli public’s faith in the seriousness of SC discussions.

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fore, when something does come up, it is almost always a “surprise” to most members.

LWII began in July 2006 when Hezbollah attacked an IDF patrol, killing six soldiers and kidnapping two.<sup>15</sup> It was well known that the Shi’ite organization was looking to kidnap soldiers to negotiate a hostage deal for terrorists held in Israel. Several similar attempts had been foiled in the prior year. But the SC was never convened to discuss what Israel would do in case such an attack should prove successful. Thus, on that day, the issue was new territory to most of the ministers.

Similarly, in the period leading to Protective Edge, the underground tunnels that Hamas had dug into Israel and were defined as “strategic” by Prime Minister Netanyahu were presented to the SC only in general outline which, in the state comptroller’s words, “didn’t reflect the severity of the tunnel threat . . . and was in no way in line with the essence and severity as reflected in security documents” (State Comptroller of Israel, 2018, p. 11). In fact, in the 14

months leading to Protective Edge, there was only one SC discussion regarding Gaza (Shelah, 2015, p. 257). SC members could not argue with IDF officers who dismissed the danger of the tunnels in the beginning of the campaign nor contradict the PM when he moved to launch a land operation (never before presented to them) against those same tunnels a week later. Neither were they aware of the army's lack of preparations to destroy those tunnels.

The Winograd Commission (2008, p. 55) referred to this gap in terms appropriate to many other instances in Israel's recent history:

It's ill-fitting to respond to a crisis by improvisation alone, without a proper base of thought and planning . . . this is especially true when the crisis is caused by a traumatic event, leading to a wish for an immediate and powerful response, so as to prevent a feeling of helplessness and frustration. These instances require a planning base, including important insights—relying among other things on practice and intellectual games—on the base of which the improvisation is to be carried out. That is why it's important to adhere to a protocol, in order to minimize the danger of impulsive responses, based solely on intuition or feeling, and practice that protocol until it becomes second nature.

This is especially pertinent because all of Israel's military clashes after 1982 stemmed not from a precursory decision by an enemy or Israeli leader (such as Egypt's and Syria's decision to attack Israel in October 1973 or Israel's decision to invade Lebanon in 1982) but evolved from an incident or series of incidents, reaction to reaction, that deteriorated into full-scale fighting without prior intent on any side. "A proper base of thought and planning" is all the

more necessary in cases for which the timing and place of any specific event may be surprising but the probability of it happening is much less so.

### The Case of the Syrian Reactor: A Counterexample

When asked to name a positive example for a decision-making process in security matters, many Israeli experts would point to Prime Minister Olmert's handling of the nuclear reactor built covertly in the early 2000s by Syria and destroyed by Israel in a bombing raid on the night and early morning of September 5–6, 2007.<sup>16</sup>

The reactor near Deir ez-Zor was discovered and verified in March 2007. Years of construction somehow escaped the intelligence coverage that Israel had in Syria. The decision to destroy it was almost immediate following the so-called Begin Doctrine established in the bombing of the Osirak reactor in Iraq in 1981.<sup>17</sup> However, this still left decisions to be made over the means and steps to use to avoid an ensuing military clash with Syria.

Olmert, still smarting from public criticism of his decisions during WWII, led an impressive process that included extensive discussions in various forums. And although hundreds were involved in these discussions and preparations, nothing leaked. The final guidance was "No Core, No War"—destroy the reactor, but the modus operandi was to minimize the chances of retaliation that might lead to war. The directive was clear and practical enough for the military planners, affecting the chosen attack mode as well as the enveloping efforts on all fronts.

But the Syrian reactor case was also unique. It was a decision on a single action rather than a prolonged campaign, and there was little argument over the necessity to destroy the reactor. In fact, Olmert himself testified that

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his immediate reaction, when informed by the head of Mossad Meir Dagan of the existence of the reactor, was “we will destroy it.”<sup>18</sup> Other options, such as exposing the reactor’s existence and exerting international pressure, were discussed but quite summarily dismissed.

In a conversation with this author, Olmert said that

... this is first and foremost a matter of personality. When you face a problem, some people are able to focus on the right thing and establish a position. Others float around in the gray zone for a long time, unable to reach a decision. But I made that statement long before the planes took off, and it was meant or taken as a decree to act immediately. This spontaneous reaction doesn’t nullify the profound process needed to reach the right decision—and, in the case of the Syrian reactor, that process took place fully.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, there was much time to discuss, make plans, and change them. The whole process took six months from the time of discovery to the bombing itself. The process was also unilateral, because Syria did not retaliate. There was also plentiful concrete intelligence leading to the conclusion that Syrian President Bashar Hafez al-Assad would be able to contain the incident internally

and avoid the need to retaliate. Finally, the affair revolved around a specific issue with relatively narrow ramifications and few outside influencing vectors unlike decisions regarding a protracted military operation; a political decision, such as a peace agreement; or a budgetary issue. It remains a fine example of decisionmaking in a very stressful atmosphere, but its lessons are only partially applicable to other circumstances.

### The Iran Issue: The Security Cabinet Taken Out of the Loop

Discussions of a possible attack on Iran in the beginning of the 2010s provide another case study. Although the SC was by law the deciding body of the government to approve such an attack, Prime Minister Netanyahu preferred to hold intensive discussions on the Iranian question in an informal ministerial group known as “The Seven.” This not only left most SC members out of the loop but also meant that the capabilities, knowledge, and methods of the NSS were not part of the process, which was instead handled by the PM’s military attaché whose office had no matching capabilities. According to a special report by the State Comptroller’s Office, there were 57 such discussions

between April 2009 and January 2011, many more than the number of SC meetings on all other issues combined (State Comptroller of Israel, 2012, pp. 34–35). Former NSS chief Uzi Arad said that The Seven meetings, “being informal and lacking any authority other than the PM’s authority to sum up every discussion, were in many ways a step back in establishing modern work procedures in the government” (Arad and Ben-Har, 2016, p. 213).

It is, of course, reasonable that a PM would like to discuss a top-security matter in a more intimate forum to avoid leaks and have a more candid discussion. But SC members were denied detailed knowledge of what could have been one of the most crucial decisions in Israel’s history—a decision, once again, that the SC solely had the legal authority to make. According to several reports, Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to make operative decisions circumventing the SC, which (according to the former head of Mossad Dagan and others) could have led to a war. According to the investigative television program *Uvda* [Fact], in 2010, Netanyahu wanted to put the IDF on short alert for an attack in Iran. Dagan and former IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi warned that this could lead to war and first insisted on formal SC approval (Channel 2 TV, 2012).

Zohar Palti, former Political-Military Bureau chief at Israel’s Ministry of Defense, recently described the scene during the 2012 discussions in vivid terms:

We stood there Chief of Staff Benni Gantz, Mossad chief Tamir Pardo, head of the Planning Branch Amir Eshel, Head of the Intelligence Branch Aviv Kochavi and myself, looking at each other and wondering: what just happened? What do they (Netan-

yahu and Barak) want? Are they really planning to attack like this, out of the blue? (Harel, 2022)

“Out of the blue,” of course, also meant without proper discussion with the SC. By law, an attack such as that being considered, which might lead to a major escalation, requires authorization by the SC.

## Who Decides to Go to War . . . and to Make Peace?

In 2018, the Basic Law: The Government was changed, moving the right to declare war or authorize “a significant military action which might lead to war” from the full cabinet to the SC (Basic Law: The Government, 2001b, Articles 40a and 40a[1]). An attempt to further delegate that authority, in certain unspecified instances, to the PM and defense minister alone failed in the Knesset. Several

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times PMs have served concurrently as defense minister. Had the change passed, Israel could have legally gone to war based on the decision of a single person (Kuzin and Bender, 2017).

### Keeper of the Walls: A Recent Example

During the May 2021 Gaza campaign, known in Israel as Operation Keeper of the Walls, Hamas announced that it would fire rockets on Jerusalem should the Israeli police forces not withdraw from Temple Mount and the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. The SC did not discuss the ramifications of the Gaza terrorist organization assuming a de facto role as “protector of Jerusalem.” Once Hamas made good on its threat, the IDF presented three goals for its operations: “Hitting hard at the military capabilities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza; damaging their ability to renew those capabilities, which would limit their motivation for

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future confrontations with Israel; renewing the Israeli deterrence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which had eroded since Operation Protective Edge” (Ben-Yishai, 2021).

The IDF’s formulation of the goals for the operation and the manner in which the SC deliberation process was conducted were both problematic. The IDF formulation relied on physical action to achieve debatable psychological goals for deterrence purposes—something Israel had failed to achieve in the past. And it failed to address Hamas’ objectives, which became evident in the first 24 hours of the fighting: establishing itself as the guardian of Jerusalem and agitating the Arab-Israeli public and the Palestinians in the West Bank (neither a feature of previous campaigns).

The classic methodology of strategic planning defines that the beginning of the process is the *guidelines of the political leaders*, which in turn guides the military leaders in defining what the IDF terms the *strategic purpose* of the operation, approved by the SC, and consequently the military plans themselves. As previous examples show, this methodology has only seldom been carried out in this way in Israel. Furthermore, classic strategic planning applies more to conventional wars and is harder to implement in an asymmetric campaign in which the terms of victory are often more vague.

The way to counter this problem is a high level of discussion and decisionmaking by politicians and considerable discourse between them and the generals. Both sides should step out of their mutual comfort zone and engage in real, open-ended discourse about complicated issues, rather than considering first and foremost how they could not be blamed for mediocre outcomes.

This did not happen in 2014 or in most other Gaza campaigns. The politicians were content with the IDF

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presenting the objectives, the situation assessment, the analysis of Hamas's intention,<sup>20</sup> and the alternatives for action. The army settled for vague definitions of desired achievement, and the military plan was a bombing campaign, which clearly did not, and perhaps could not, lead to a major change in the state of things or delay the next outbreak.

One could even argue that withstanding the Israeli aerial attack for 51 days in Protective Edge or 12 days in Keeper of the Walls, with no air force or aerial attack capabilities of their own, even strengthened the terrorist organizations' claims that they withstood Israel's might with courage and conviction. After Keeper of the Walls, the IDF admitted that Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar was strengthened by the way events unfolded and that "for Sinwar, the war ended in victory" (Kobowitz, 2021).

There were other options available to Israel, but the SC was not presented with alternatives nor did legitimate debate occur. The SC agreed to everything the IDF presented. This helped to maintain the mutual comfort zone between politicians and generals, but the results, most Israelis would agree, were hardly satisfactory.<sup>21</sup>

### The Defense Budget and Force Buildup: More of the Same

The lacunae presented thus far are evident not only in the urgency of wartime but also in matters of budget allocation and force buildup, issues that ostensibly are less pressured for time. In its report on the IDF's five-year plan "Gideon," the Knesset Subcommittee on Security Concept and Force Buildup (2017, pp. 7–8; headed by this author), states that

there were no [SC] meetings prior to the formation of the plan within the IDF, and no guidelines by the top political echelon for the working process . . . the SC first convened to discuss the plan only after it was already underway—the 2015–2016 budget had already been approved and the "Gideon" plan had already been in effect for 3 months . . . the formation of an IDF multi-year plan should not begin without a national security concept and an IDF operations concept stemming from it, discussed and approved by the political echelon and made available to the public.

Although the ramifications of an IDF five-year plan on Israel's resources and the army's ability to carry out its mis-

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sions are significant, the political echelon chose to remain out of the process, leaving it completely to the IDF.

### **The National Security Staff**

Pundits and politicians since the 1950s have raised the idea that the PM should have an advisory council consisting of veterans of the security services and outside experts. The call was resisted by PMs (who preferred ad hoc political consultations) and defense ministers (who preferred to rely on the IDF, which is formally under their jurisdiction). On the basis of recommendations made by the Kahan Commission, convened to investigate the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila camps in 1982, newly elected Prime Minister Shimon Peres considered creating an NSC in 1984.<sup>22</sup> This

was resisted by IDF leaders who objected both to the idea and to Peres's choice to head the NSC, Major General (MG) (ret.) Avraham Tamir (Segev, 1984).

Some of the problem stemmed from a confusion between the intended objective of the proposed body—to better the decisionmaking process—and its suggested name, the National Security Council. As a former PM and defense minister (and ambassador to the United States) Yitzhak Rabin noted at the time that the U.S. version of the NSC, acting within a presidential system, is an executive body, closer in composition and function to the Israeli SC (“Rabin: Out Military Power—A Firm Base for the Diplomatic Struggle,” 1975).

### **The Early Years: Grand Title, Little Content**

Prime Minister Netanyahu first formed an NSC in 1999, headed by former Deputy Chief of Staff David Ivri. Its role was announced as being the staff for the entire government in matters of national security, preparing cabinet and SC discussions, conducting long-term planning for national security and recommending policy, and liaising with parallel international institutions (Prime Minister's Office, 1999).

Those lofty aims soon met the harsh reality of bureaucracy and politics. The IDF refused to comply—even denying the NSC the use of maps and cutting it off from its own work. In 2012, then-NSS chief Arad told a Knesset committee that “the organizations that were supposed to relinquish some of their authority to the NSS following the 2008 NSS Law . . . these things just didn't happen.”<sup>23</sup>

Politicians did not want to rely on the NSC. In 2002, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon refused to discuss a report

prepared by the NSC, then headed by (active) MG Uzi Dayan, which claimed that education and economic equality were also part of national security (Pohorils, 2011).

A 2006 special report by the State Comptroller's Office specified occasions in which the NSC was deliberately kept out of the loop in many important policy decisions, including the 2005 disengagement from Gaza. "There is," the state comptroller wrote, "a deliberate, built-in disability of the NSC, as constructed and operated by various PMs, to answer the need and carry out the decisions, and this is harmful to the decisionmaking process in the crucial field of National Security" (State Comptroller of Israel, 2006, p. 15).

In a paper written at Sharon's request, then-head of the NSC MG (ret.) Giora Eiland summed up the ways in which the new body was blocked by politicians and generals and the ensuing harm to the decisionmaking process.<sup>24</sup>

Among other things, Eiland (2004) wrote

- There are several players in identical roles in the PM's Office and at the NSC, and it's unclear who's responsible for what.
- The PM's Office people have no capability (technically—in terms of manpower and time) to carry out full and methodical staff work; the NSC does possess this kind of capability, but this is insignificant when somebody else has the authority.
- [SC] discussions don't necessarily reflect what's important on the diplomatic-security agenda. They are clearly tilted toward what's important to the IDF and Shabak.<sup>25</sup>
- Usually there's no real preparation for the PM's discussions. The various bodies meet at the dis-

cussion itself, beginning with long and tedious intelligence presentations and end up wherever they may.

In many ways, Eiland's shockingly candid paper describes the situation that still exists.

## From NSC to NSS in 2008

The Winograd Commission, 2006, pp. 147–148, recommends strengthening the NSC and defining its functions in a special law. Another commission, headed by former IDF Chief of Staff (and SC member) Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, was appointed for implementation of the Winograd Commission's recommendations. It recommended that the new body be based on the existing NSC but with its name changed to National Security Staff to "better describe the role of the staff as a decisionmaking supporting body: to assist the PM, the government and its committees in the staff work needed in these matters" (Lipkin-Shahak Commission, 2007, p. 11).

The commission further recommended that "the NSS will be the *only* [emphasis in the original] staff body of the PM and the cabinet in these areas" and that the NSS chief "will head the NSS as well as serve as the National Security Advisor for the PM and the government" (Lipkin-Shahak Commission, 2007). This last recommendation led to problems in the proper functioning of the NSS.

The NSS bill that was passed in 2008 specified 11 duties of the NSS, all of them having to do with staff work, mostly preparations for discussions in the government and in the SC. It also specified that the NSS would be in charge of presenting alternatives for action and for gathering, and amalgamating the work of the IDF, the foreign

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The 2008 NSS bill was a realization of all the ideas presented in previous reports by various commissions and experts.

office, and other relevant agencies. It would lead a National Crisis Management Center, and the NSS chief would have authority to summon for preliminary discussions staff from “all the security organizations under the authority of the Prime Minister” (National Security Headquarters Law, 2008, Article 2b).

Notably, this bill was submitted as a private member’s bill by MKs Amira Dotan and Tzachi Hanegbi and not introduced by the government. This is not an exceptional event, but it demonstrates the unwillingness of PMs to anchor NSS powers in legislation; the government joined the legislative process only after a private member’s bill had been formulated.

The bill was, indeed, a realization of all the ideas presented in previous reports by various commissions and experts. But as early as 2012, a State Comptroller’s Office report covering a period beginning in 2009 (i.e., almost immediately after the bill passed) showed few of the bill’s

aims had become reality. The situation would deteriorate in ensuing years.

Former NSS chief Arad, speaking before the Knesset State Control Committee, stated that

in 2008, the SC became the responsibility of the NSS. But the most interesting thing is that the committees, no matter their names, which dealt with the issues to which all investigative commissions have pointed, i.e., operational situations or using force or war, the heart of the decisionmaking process, were the last to be moved to the NSS, if at all. The case of the (Turkish) flotilla exemplifies this:<sup>26</sup> The NSS, which was prepared and asked several times to have a preparatory and integrative discussion, did not get its wish. The NSS even pointed out that this was illegal.<sup>27</sup>

Charles D. Freilich, deputy national security advisor to Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Sharon, referred in 2013 to the IDF as “a phenomenal bureaucratic player” and mentioned that Barak, then defense minister under Netanyahu, forbade senior generals from attending meetings summoned by the NSS (Keinon, 2013). This has been less true in recent years, but the army has remained the stronger organization; and most PMs and defense ministers still prefer to work with the IDF rather than the NSS.

That the NSS chief serves not only as the person in charge of creating a better decisionmaking process but also as national security advisor entails a built-in tension. To improve decisionmaking, the NSS chief should assume an independent, inquisitive stance that may run contrary to that of the PM, but as the national security advisor, the NSS chief is often given missions more suitable for a personal envoy of the PM. This inherent contradiction in roles proved detrimental to the functioning of the NSS,

especially in Netanyahu's second term as PM. Increasingly, the NSS chief acted as a personal representative for the PM, disengaged from the work done at the NSS.

### The Effect of the Late Netanyahu Years

During Netanyahu's second 12-year stint as PM—the longest continuous period in Israel's history—he was responsible for a deep change in the function of the NSS. He first appointed Arad, former head of the Mossad Research and Analysis Division, as the PM's foreign policy advisor in his first term to head the NSS in 2009. In 2011, Arad resigned after he was blamed for a security leak and later became one of Netanyahu's most outspoken critics.

Netanyahu isolated the NSS from the most important security issue of his tenure—the struggle to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and deciding whether Israel should bomb Iran's nuclear facilities. That the NSS was much less an instrument to improve decisionmaking and more an operative tool for the PM became more and more apparent. Finally, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Netanyahu led the operative management of the crisis with NSS chief Meir Ben-Shabbat as his primary aide, overriding government offices and ignoring how ill-equipped the NSS was to act as an operative body.

This was part of Netanyahu's growing apparent disdain for those he deemed sticklers to protocol—officials, the state comptroller, MKs, and the press—who, in attacking him, related more to procedure than outcome. In a debate over Protective Edge, he said to this author (in English, which he often used for emphasis), “It is not about doing things right, it's about doing the right thing”—which, for him, often meant doing things his way.

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That the NSS was much less an instrument to improve decisionmaking and more an operative tool for the PM became more and more apparent during the late Netanyahu years.

Netanyahu's view of the NSS chief as his own envoy rather than the head of the SC's staff was also evident in the people he chose for the position. Yossi Cohen, a former deputy head of Mossad, became NSS chief in 2013. Until then, all NSS chiefs were retired generals or security services senior officials who were not competing for a higher position in their former organizations.<sup>28</sup> Cohen, aspiring to become the next head of Mossad—an appointment made directly by the PM—was now fulfilling the role while “auditioning” with the person who would (and did) decide whether to give him the position that he had strived for his entire professional life. It is hard to reconcile this with the necessary state of mind required for the NSS, which Cohen was selected to lead.

Netanyahu's next appointees, all of them with lower ranks in the security organizations than their predecessors, were either appointed on an interim basis or vying

for a position in their original organizations. More and more, they were sent on political missions—for example, when interim NSS chief Ben-Shabbat met with Rabbi Haim Drukman to “brief him on security matters,” with the obvious intent of persuading the rabbi to influence politicians close to him not to resign from Netanyahu’s government (Eichner, 2018).

Even when not political, the growing role of the NSS chief as personal envoy collided more and more with the required nature of the role’s primary task. In 2016, the interim NSS chief, Brigadier General (ret.) Yaacov Nagel, was sent by Netanyahu to negotiate the memorandum of understanding (MOU) for military aid from the United States, as well as the agreement with Germany regarding the acquisition of three new submarines for the IDF navy and the détente with Turkey following the 2009 Marmara crisis. These were all important missions, fit for the PM’s personal envoy (as was the case when Olmert or Sharon reached similar agreements). The problem was that while Nagel was carrying them out, the NSS as a staff for security discussions and decisionmaking was pushed aside.

This was evident, to give just one example, in the Knesset Defense and Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Defense Strategy and Force Buildup’s report (2017, p. 3) on the IDF’s Gideon multi-year plan:

The committee members came to the conclusion that contrary to the stipulations of the NSS Law of 2008, the NSS isn’t in fact a significant staff body for decisionmakers, assisting in forming directives which take into account the overall picture of the country’s needs and means, and making sure these directives are reflected in the IDF’s plans for force buildup and operations. We regretfully state that had the NSS not

existed at all, that very little would have changed in the IDF’s multi-year plan.

As the head of the subcommittee at the time who wrote the above comment, this author can personally attest that while the NSS protested these words, many of its senior officials expressed their agreement with them in private conversations.

## **Observations on Possible Improvement**

Despite the focus of various committees, the national security decisionmaking process in Israel remains personal and political, lacking proper staff work and balance between civilian and military personnel. However, the growing discontent with the outcomes that result from this arrangement—such as the recent campaigns in Gaza and the effort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities—gives hope that the necessary steps to rectify this situation can yet be implemented. Such action does not require great political acumen. There is little debate about the need, and a PM wishing to do right will meet little resistance in doing so.

## **The Security Cabinet Law**

Following criticism of SC function during Operation Protective Edge in 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu formed a committee, headed by former NSS Chief Yaacov Amidror, to recommend improvements, but that committee decided against amendments to the existing National Security Headquarters Law. No law can compel a PM to follow

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The growing discontent with the outcomes that result from the national security decisionmaking process in Israel—such as the recent campaigns in Gaza and the effort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities—gives hope that the necessary steps to rectify this situation can yet be implemented.

procedures that they may not want to follow for political or personal reasons. But, a detailed and explicit law would present the basis against which SC operation may be observed by the Knesset, the state comptroller, and the general public. Attention and scrutiny of the NSS were largely enhanced after the bill was passed in 2008.

A bill presented by this author to the 20th Knesset stipulated that a minister would become a member of the SC only after being properly briefed and prepared by the NSS, and then “devote proper and adequate time to prepare for and study material relating to SC discussions” (Knesset, 2016). The SC would be convened at least once a month. An SC member could ask twice yearly for the discussion of a topic of their choosing. Each SC member would be able to consult with, and have present in the discussion, an outside advisor approved by the NSS.

This last provision came following remarks by SC members to the state comptroller and the Knesset Defense and Foreign Relations Committee that they were disadvan-

taged during discussions because the IDF and NSS representatives were already in line with the PM and the defense minister on a predecided position. These SC members, on the other hand, were not able to consult with other experts or even have them present in the room.

No less important are the provisions stating that the SC should be convened regularly and not only for votes on an immediate decision. The Lipkin-Shahak Commission recommended meetings every two weeks (Lipkin-Shahak Commission, 2007, p. 27). This would enhance the knowledge of ministers on subjects they are likely to decide on in the future and also present an opportunity for SC members to raise issues that they find crucial but may not be convenient for the PM. As Arad and Ben-Har, 2016, p. 280, notes (of the British model of the NSC), once meetings were held at regular, predetermined dates, “this created a habit of preparation for the ministers and stabilized their availability for the meeting.”

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The goal is to provide an independent, civil-oriented, and broader basis for decisionmaking.

### **Procedures for the Security Council's Work**

The PM's Office and the SC work would benefit from meetings that also include discussions on general subjects, grand strategy, and timely inspection of established positions. The NSS could develop an array of feasible options for evaluation and consideration beyond those of the security organizations and the PM's initial view. The Winograd Commission (2008, p. 297) notes the value of always presenting a "second opinion" to decisionmakers beyond that of the IDF, in part to reduce the risk of "group think" failures."

### **Prime Minister and Defense Ministry Civilian Staff**

Israel needs a clear division between the civil and military partners for SC discussions. A strengthened Defense Ministry staff need no longer rely solely on uniformed staff for planning, economic analysis, and intelligence appraisal but would instead possess its own expertise. There is no need for a huge apparatus: The raw material would still be gathered and prepared for discussion by the IDF.

The goal is to provide an independent, civil-oriented, and broader basis for decisionmaking. This is mostly

important vis-à-vis issues having to do with force buildup, defense budgets, and long-term strategy. In these issues, there is inherent tension between the interests and priorities of the IDF and those of the civilian side. The defense minister needs an independent perspective. The minister would no longer be viewed as the IDF's representative or the "chief of the military trade union" as many ministers have been called in the past.

Strengthening the PM's Office would also define clearly what the NSS is in charge of—staff work for the PM and the SC to better the decisionmaking process—and the operative, practical missions that the PM's envoys must carry out. Other vital work, such as the negotiation of MOUs with foreign countries or diplomatic missions on the PM's behalf, would be carried out by other means.

### **NSS Focus on Primary Missions**

Remnants of past functions remain annexed to the NSS though irrelevant to its primary staff mission. For example, the Counter-Terrorism Staff, once an independent wing within the PM's Office, was later folded into the NSS. The NSS needs to focus on duties in accord with the NSS Law guidance, that is, serving as the staff for the PM and the SC's discussions on matters of national security—and not on duties that should fall to the PM's Office. NSS work, by its nature, requires a different temperament from that required for the other missions. To create broader, deeper, and better-informed SC discussions, the NSS must assume an independent position, including one sometimes contrary to those of other security organizations—or even to that of the PM. This work cannot go hand in hand with the NSS serving as the operative body carrying out missions for the PM.

## Israel's Security Concept and Its Procedures for Budgetary and Operational Decisions

Israel has never had a formal, cabinet-approved, and publicly presented national security concept for reasons beyond the scope of this paper. But in the context of the decisionmaking process, lacking a proper basis for discussion hampers the functioning of the SC and understanding by the Israeli public.

Discussion on operational or budgetary decisions conducted by politicians is inherently influenced by actual or perceived public opinion. The lack of an explicit security concept, presenting the goals and means of preserving Israel's security by the presiding government, weakens the discussion considerably. In its "Gideon" report, the Knesset Subcommittee on Security Concept and Force Buildup specified the steps required to have a proper basis for discussion. The SC could approve and make public a National Security Concept paper, specifying the concept and its implications on force buildup. Operational concepts and plans would be derived from that, leading ultimately to force structure decisions and budgetary requirements (Knesset Subcommittee on Security Concept and Force Buildup, 2017, pp. 8–10).

Such documents, and the process of their preparation and approval, would immensely improve the knowledge of the politicians and create public legitimacy for these decisions. These could prevent failings such as those evident in LWII or Protective Edge when ill-informed SC members, influenced by their perception of public opinion, approved operations for which the IDF was ill-prepared and could serve no real purpose.

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### Security Council Process and Other Agencies

The dominance of serving officers (and former military turned politicians) in SC discussions cements the tendency to view things through an operational lens. Other agencies, most notably the Foreign Ministry, are either absent from the room or not given enough time to present other perspectives.

The Winograd Commission (2008, p. 298) recommends the "full integration of the Foreign Ministry in security decisions with diplomatic implications." The same might apply to other government offices in their respective fields (internal security, finance, etc.) whenever relevant. This would entail not only participation of the respective minister in the meeting but also inclusion of their staff in the preparation for the discussion and the formation of suggested alternative decisions.

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It is now past time to take a harder look at Israel's capacity for national security decisionmaking.

### **Knesset Defense and Foreign Relations Committee Involvement**

The Knesset Defense and Foreign Relations Committee tends to be busy more with oversight than legislation. But in a very Israeli manner, this committee, often consisting of MKs with a rich history in the security organizations, can carry out a more profound and serious discourse than that held in the SC. Its subcommittees, parallel in many ways to U.S. congressional committees, can hold lengthy, deep-diving discussions. Unlike the SC, in over nearly 75 years of the committee's existence, and especially in the 36 years in which most of its work has been done in its subcommittees, there have been almost no leaks. The atmosphere is as close to nonpartisan as politicians can get. An MK who is a member of several subcommittees can, over time, because of the breadth and depth of discussion in the Knesset compared with the SC, amass a unique body of knowledge, far wider and deeper than that of the average SC member.

The committee needs to fulfill several functions: It can host real debates on security matters, present government members and officials with different points of view, and present various issues to the general public with reports and declarations. In this way, it can help enrich the public debate and facilitate better discussion on all levels.

Admittedly, this is not always the case. Quite often, the committee functions as a "House of Lords" in which former senior officials in the IDF and the intelligence services gather to hear the news about their former workplaces and mostly give them automatic support. But a well-functioning committee can improve discussion in ways almost nonexistent at the SC level.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Israel may be justly proud of the strides it has made in the nearly 75 years since its founding. It has created for itself important economic and security roles in both its region and globally. In certain respects, however, it has retained institutions and processes that better suited a smaller nation concerned primarily with its own continued existence. The issues that Israel now confronts in the security realm, and the consequences of those decisions for itself and the world, suggest that it is now past time to take a harder look at its capacity for national security decision-making. Now is the time for Israel to take the steps that most consider to be necessary and yet have, until now, been only marginally addressed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Israel's basic laws are the closest thing it has to a constitution. See Knesset, undated.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Kahlon, former member of the Knesset, in-person interview with the author, Tel Aviv, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> As an example, Defense Minister Benny Gantz scored much higher on public trust than any of his peers in a TV opinion poll in August 2021. The pollsters remarked that “the Defense Minister has always been the most popular minister. This is the way it has always been and will be in the future, except for cases when the army fails and the DM pays the price” (“The State of Trust in the Government: Gantz at the Top, Lieberman at the Bottom,” 2021).

<sup>4</sup> This Perspective is based on interviews, public documents, media reports, and personal observations by the author. The author does not draw on any classified records or similar sensitive material or draw any inferences or conclusions based on such sources.

<sup>5</sup> In the past, the PM has sometimes also held one of the other ministerial positions.

<sup>6</sup> The State Comptroller Office's report on Operation Protective Edge, the 2014 Gaza conflict, stated that “all members of the 33rd Cabinet, except for the former Minister of Defense, claimed that they didn't get background material for the Cabinet meetings, and therefore were not properly ready for the discussions” (State Comptroller of Israel, 2018, p. 8).

<sup>7</sup> In recent years, there have also been more leaks to the press, sometimes even during the course of the discussion. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon convened the SC only when forced or when “there was a legal necessity to ratify steps the PM could not authorize alone. Sharon didn't like the uncertainty of such discussions, and like every other PM, preferred to pursue many [of] the foreign relations and security matters free of the [SC] constraints” (Arad and Ben-Har, 2016, p. 93).

<sup>8</sup> Ehud Olmert, former prime minister of Israel, in-person interview with the author, Tel Aviv, October 25, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> As an example, then-Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman told the state comptroller, speaking of Operation Protective Edge, that “during the operation the Foreign Ministry presented many papers, including

to the NSS, claiming that Hamas was not going to capitulate, but these papers had no effect on the Cabinet discussions” (State Comptroller of Israel, 2018, p. 38).

<sup>10</sup> Former chiefs of staff who also served as defense ministers include Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Shaul Mofaz, Moshe Yaalon, and Benny Gantz.

<sup>11</sup> Former IDF staff officer, in-person interview with the author, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, September 2021 (name withheld on request).

<sup>12</sup> Shaul Mofaz had previously served as IDF chief of staff before entering politics.

<sup>13</sup> Ehud Olmert, former prime minister of Israel, in-person interview with the author, Jerusalem, October 25, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Former SC member, in-person interview with the author, Jerusalem, September 2021 (name withheld on request).

<sup>15</sup> The two died in the attack, but this was not known until much later.

<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of writing this section, the author conducted several interviews with SC members and IDF personnel involved with the Syrian reactor operation.

<sup>17</sup> The Begin Doctrine originates in the aftermath of Operation Opera in which Israel preemptively destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in June 1981. Menachem Begin stated, “On no account shall we permit an enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against the people of Israel.” Begin explicitly stated that the strike was not an anomaly but instead called the event “a precedent for every future government in Israel”; it remains a feature of Israeli security planning policy. See “Menachem Begin,” 2022; and Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Ehud Olmert, former prime minister of Israel, in-person interview with the author, Jerusalem, October 25, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Ehud Olmert, former prime minister of Israel, in-person interview with the author, Jerusalem, October 25, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Seven years before, during Protective Edge, the IDF intelligence branch predicted time and again that Hamas would agree to a cease-fire because its leaders want to “end the fighting.” Time and again, this did not happen.

<sup>21</sup> In an opinion poll conducted the day after the operation ended, 29 percent of Israelis said that Israel had won and 59 percent said that it had not. In another poll, 26 percent of Israelis said that Israel had won, 16 percent thought that Hamas had won, and 54 percent answered that neither side had won (Ben Meir, 2014, p. 133).

<sup>22</sup> Knesset State Control Committee, in-person discussion with the author, Jerusalem, March 12, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Knesset State Control Committee, in-person discussion with the author, Jerusalem, March 12, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, there were no fewer than seven heads in the first eight years of the NSC's existence.

<sup>25</sup> Shabak is the Israeli acronym for the General Security Service usually referred to in English as Shin Bet.

<sup>26</sup> In May 2010, a flotilla of six boats sailed from Turkey toward the Gaza coast to protest what the organizers called the Israeli blockade of Gaza. In an attempt to stop it, the boats were raided by IDF naval commandos who were attacked with knives and hatchets when they boarded the main ship, the *Mavi Marmara*. The commandos opened fire, and nine protesters were killed (State Comptroller of Israel, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Knesset State Control Committee, in-person discussion with the author, Jerusalem, March 12, 2012. The reference is to what was called the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" in May 2010.

<sup>28</sup> The notable exception was MG Uzi Dayan, who had been appointed by Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 2000 while still in uniform and vying to become IDF chief of staff.

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## **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to express great appreciation to the RAND Corporation, and particularly to Steven W. Popper, Linda Robinson, Robin Meili, and Shira Efron, for accepting the idea of publishing a Perspective on Israel's security decisionmaking under the auspices of the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy, as well as for their invaluable editorial remarks. The author also thanks the various Israeli officials who agreed to share their views on this subject. He is grateful to his reviewers Haim Blumenblatt, owner of ATENS Ltd. and former chief of staff to an Israeli defense minister, and Raphael Cohen, senior political scientist at RAND, for their suggestions and edits, which contributed to the strength of this Perspective.

## About This Perspective

Throughout its existence, Israel has faced security challenges and has struggled with how best to make decisions to address them. Despite recommendations in many official reports for improving Israel's national security decisionmaking process, flaws persist. These flaws are most evident in the work of the government's security cabinet, the highest political echelon involved in these matters, and the National Security Council, the organization responsible for preparing more-informed discussions that lead to better decisions.

In this Perspective, the author examines the inherent flaws in the function of these entities and in the process as a whole through a review of past examples of national security decisionmaking and interviews with former and current officials, reflects on the underlying causes of these flaws, and suggests avenues toward a decisionmaking apparatus that is better suited to the challenges the country faces today.

## Funding

Funding for this project was provided by the generous contributions of the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy Advisory Board and donors to RAND's Israel Program.

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