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CHANGING ATTITUDES OF THE ISRAELI POLITICAL LEADERSHIP TOWARD THE USE OF FORCE

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There appears to be a pattern of evidence pointing to a growing reluctance on the part of the Israeli political leadership to use military force against Israel's enemies. The dovish-hawkish continuum in Israel is a multi-dimensional one involving the dispute over territories, the dispute over how to deal with the Palestinian issue and the PLO, the dispute over the level of threat perception, and the dispute over the time factor and whether it works in Israel's favor. Perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, I have reason to believe that in recent years Israel's political leadership has moved toward the center or the left and has become more dovish. Attitudes concerning the employment of force represent one aspect of this multidimensional, dovish-hawkish continuum.

Problems of Measurement

It is very difficult to deal with the issue of changing attitudes in comparative terms, to compare to what has been in the past. For many of the examples offered, it may be argued that on one day

the same set of people will decide one way and on the next day they will decide something very different, and that one cannot predict the behavior of people when the chips are down because each set of actual circumstances is going to be different. It may also be argued that often Israel must use force in reaction to events that are not always under its control.

Moreover, in seeking indications of reluctance, one must look at the absence of action, whereas usually it is difficult enough for observers to explain why something occurred. Yet while it is problematic to discuss things which do not happen, the pattern of evidence seems to lead to the conclusion that the Israeli political leadership increasingly shies away from the employment of force.

Who Really Supported the Iraqi Reactor Raid?

The first example of reluctance to use force involves the Israeli decision to attack the Iraqi nuclear reactor in June 1981, during the first Begin government. Nowadays, everybody seems to agree

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that this was a just and very effective use of force and there is no great debate about it, but if we look at how the key figures among Israel's political leadership looked at it at the time, we see a very different picture.

At that time, Labor was in opposition and all of the Labor leadership were against the attack — Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Mordechai (Mota) Gur, Simcha Dinitz, Yitzhak Navon, Abba Eban. Even those who belonged to the hawkish camp within Labor were against it. Most of the opposition leaders knew well in advance about the impending attack and they tried to prevent it. There exists a letter, well-known in Israel, written in code by Shimon Peres to Prime Minister Menachem Begin warning of the dire results of such an attack.

Within the Likud government itself at the time there were differences of opinion and no consensus in support of the attack on the nuclear reactor. Menachem Begin, Ariel Sharon, Moshe Nissim and Yitzhak Shamir were in favor, while others like David Levy were against. Levy eventually voted in favor of the attack at the formal government vote but he was very reluctant to do so. The other coalition partners in the government were against the attack: Yigal Yadin and Israel Katz of the Democratic Movement for Change, and Yosef Burg and Zevulun Hammer of the National Religious Party (NRP). At that time Ezer Weizman, who was outside the government but was still considered a Likud leader, was against the attack.

Similar differences of opinion were seen as well at the highest operational levels of the military. Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan was in favor, while Yitzhak Hofi, the head of the Mossad, was against. Also against were Yehoshua Saguy, the head of the Intelligence Branch, Nati Sharoni, the head of the Planning Division, and Abrasha Tamir of National Security Planning in the Ministry of Defense. So we see that this action, considered so just and effective today, did not evoke widespread support at the time from within major segments of the Israeli leadership.

Lebanon and the "No-Choice War" Debate

The second example involves the Lebanese War begun in June 1982. Immediately after the IDF invaded Lebanon there was widespread support in the Knesset for military action there. Many thought it was just a repetition of the Litani operation of 1978. But after a short while this consensus eroded and the "no-choice war" debate surfaced in Israel.

The initial conceptual framework of the Lebanese War was that of a big preventive or preemptive opera-

tion with wide-reaching ancillary goals, a type of military operation that was not so new. I do not agree with those who claim that Israel's involvement in Lebanon was the result of major changes in Israeli strategic thinking made at the time by the Likud.

The Sinai Campaign of 1956 had been a similar preventive attack with ancillary goals. At that time it was quite clear that one of the goals was to depose Nasser. Similarly in the War of Attrition (1969-70), Nasser's regime was a target, particularly at the time of the deep penetration bombings of Egypt. Israel's threat to use force in September 1970 in order to help protect King Hussein of Jordan against an invading Syrian armored column was in clear support of a political goal.

Furthermore, the actual architects of the Lebanese War were good old-fashioned Mapai-niks from the party of David Ben-Gurion — Ariel Sharon and Rafael Eitan — whose formative years in terms of their security thinking was the period of the retaliation raids of the 1950s. They can still be viewed as basically Mapai people, very much security-oriented. Eitan's Tzomet party of today is this type of party, drawing its support also from ex-Laborites who are disappointed with the move of Labor towards the left. Sharon, despite the fact that he occasionally cites from Jabotinsky, is obviously not flesh and bone of the Betar movement — the ideological core of the dominant Herut faction in Likud.

Even within Likud, we know that there were those against the action in Lebanon, primarily David Levy and Mordechai Zipori, as well as Yosef Burg from the NRP.

By the end of the summer of 1982 public opposition arose against fighting a "war by choice." Actually, there is no such thing as a no-choice war; there is always a choice, including surrender. Yet, this was a term that had great political attractiveness and its most important connotation was the implication that a war by choice was not a just war.

The Lebanese War continues to be debated and criticized, not only because its usefulness is still debatable but because there are doubts about its justice. There is a big difference between the two arguments. One can say Israel conducted the wrong war, that it was not well thought out in advance, that it was not well planned, that Israel tried to accomplish too much; but this is very different than saying it was not a just war.

During the summer of 1982, Begin attempted to attack this notion of no-choice war in a major address at the IDF Staff and Command College, declaring that

a war by choice saves casualties and leaves Israel with the initiative in choosing the timing of the war and the appropriate political circumstances. Yet those arguments were not accepted by public opinion at large and Begin failed in his attempt to attack head-on the popular term "no-choice war."

Israelis still prefer to fight a war in a situation which can be described as one of no choice. The debate over the Lebanese War indicates that "war by choice" is not an acceptable term in Israeli political culture. Rabin's criticism of the Lebanese War was expressed in utilitarian terms, because it did not work and was a miscalculation, but he refrained from using choice/no-choice terminology. On the other hand, there was another more prevalent type of criticism which made the war not only a mistake but a bad war.

Future Constraints to Using Force

Looking at the expressions of the politicians at the time of the Lebanese War, we see greater criticism particularly of preventive strikes, and also some criticism of preemptive strikes as well. A preventive strike is similar to the Israeli action in Sinai in 1956. A preemptive strike is to forestall an imminent enemy attack. From the arguments presented during this debate we begin to see the outlines of certain possible restraining factors on future Israeli military action.

The first possible restraining factor would involve adoption of the view that military action may be taken only when there is a tremendous immediate threat. For example, Victor Shem Tov of Mapam proposed in the Knesset that Israel should go to war only if faced with a major existential threat. Similarly, Yaakov Tsur, a Labor party hawk and presently the Minister of Agriculture, has said force should be used only for the immediate security needs of Israel.

Another restraining factor would be adoption of the view that force is to be used only after exhaustive diplomatic efforts. Abba Eban wrote that the war of 1967 was justified in comparison to the 1982 war because in 1967 the Israeli government allowed diplomatic efforts to take their course and only when they failed was the use of force justified.

Still another restraining factor concerns the definition of legitimate goals: for what types of goals is the use of force justified? It is quite clear that those who raised this criticism believed that those goals as defined by the government at that time were far-reaching and exaggerated. Haim Bar-Lev, from the hawkish faction of Labor, denied the justice of the war in Lebanon because its goals were not directly linked to security

needs — the existence and well-being of the State of Israel. He said that building a strong government in Lebanon, expelling the Syrians from there, or removing the Palestinian terrorists were commendable goals but did not justify using force.

One additional restraining factor would involve the degree of need for consensus in order to employ force. Again, Yaakov Tsur of Labor expressed the opinion that a large national consensus is needed and he insisted that a mere majority was not enough. Since 1984, the Labor party platform has included a clause saying that in order to exercise force a large consensus is needed. This unprecedented stance is another indicator of a growing reluctance to use force among the leadership and a restraining factor upon their freedom of action.

In the late 1980s, years after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, I interviewed over 60 Knesset members and one of the questions asked was: Would you ever favor a preventive strike (as in 1956) or a preemptive strike (as in 1967). To my surprise, the study found that some of the senior figures in Labor as well as backbenchers in Likud were willing to consider a preemptive strike but not a preventive strike. If such a view were to be adopted, Israeli leaders would have to prove to the public that any future threat was as immediate as that of 1967.

Use of Force in the Intifada

The intifada is another example of Israeli military restraint. In my opinion, the Israeli military reaction to the intifada was a conscious policy involving the rather moderate use of force in order not to cause the bulk of the Arab population to feel they had nothing to lose. It was this decision to employ limited force that led, for example, to the beatings of civilians. "Nobody dies of beatings," Rabin said at the time, in explaining his wish to minimize casualties. Since then this policy of measured force has been the rule, even when Likud was in power without Labor as a partner. So even when Moshe Arens of Likud, a right-wing party, took control of the defense ministry in 1990, the rather moderate policy toward the intifada with regard to the use of force continued. Benjamin Begin of Likud, a thoughtful politician with an impeccable hawkish reputation, was another supporter of this policy.

Yet, there was a lot of criticism of Rabin's policy toward the intifada even in his own party. The doves in Labor regarded the moderate use of force as excessive use of force. These same circles also pay close attention to the IDF's open-fire regulations and its

special anti-terror units, which again indicates that certain actions involving force which were commendable in the past are now much more likely to be criticized.

In addition to examples of internal criticism of Israeli military action, let us add in evidence a few examples of Israeli inaction that were quite unexpected. First, in October 1990 the Syrians used their airforce to depose General Aoun in Lebanon in clear violation of the 1976 agreement on "red lines" between Israel, Lebanon and Syria, but this passed without any Israeli reaction. It was also quite astonishing in the winter of 1991, when Israel suffered the attack of at least 39 missiles, that the most right-wing Israeli government in history refrained from retaliating, despite explicit threats to do so. There was a period of almost a month in which Israel had good reason to react and the Shamir government, which included hardliners such as Yuval Neeman, Ariel Sharon, and Rehavam Zeevi, did nothing in reaction. Even some outstanding Israeli doves felt embarrassed by the government's policy.

Under the new Rabin government we have already seen several examples of restrictions on the use of force. In October 1992, after katyusha attacks on the Galilee, Rabin could not muster a majority to go after the Hizbollah. In February 1993 the same government again refrained from reacting to Hizbollah attacks, against the advice of the military.

The Legacy of the Yom Kippur War

The watershed for current Israeli thinking on the use of force was probably the 1973 war. Since then, primarily under the influence of Rabin but also others, Israeli strategic thinking has been more defensive, with the short exception of 1981-82 when Sharon was defense minister. Since 1973, there has clearly been less emphasis on preventive and preemptive attacks, which have become politically problematic, as part of Israel's security strategy.

In 1973 it was quite clear that a military victory was not transformed into a political victory. The Egyptian military defeat was followed by Israeli withdrawals. In 1982 it was the same. The Israeli army was in Beirut but Israel could not translate its military superiority into the achievement of political goals and peace with Lebanon proved elusive. Both of these experiences may have helped bring about a greater awareness of the limitations of the use of force.

To some extent we now see the contours of a new concept of national power. Shimon Peres is speaking of the decline in importance of military force and that

economic and technological progress is more important than military prowess. This new type of thinking is similar to ideas growing in popularity throughout the West.

After 1973 we also saw much greater public openness about discussing security issues and the consequence is greater criticism of the army, of the use of force, and other things which the government is doing. The public is nowadays much less tolerant of military miscalculations, which makes the politicians more careful in deciding on the use of force.

Still another factor is a greater awareness of the negative side effects of constantly being at war. There is talk of how the constant fighting is corrupting the youth and making them intolerant, that this type of society at war has a price. There is a greater fear now about the brutalization of Israeli society, a new concern which was not expressed before the 1980s. Laborite Yaakov Tsur listed among other bad features of the Lebanese War the fear of "distortion of our moral image." He feared moral corruption as a side effect of the preoccupation with war. Since the beginning of the intifada in December 1987 more voices have been heard over the negative impact on Israeli society of the use of force against civilians. Mordechai Gur told the Knesset of his concern that this type of engagement is a breeding ground for Kahanism and racism. Haim Bar-Lev also commented on the growing intolerance fostered by such interaction.

Another more visible constraint on using force involves the greater consideration given to legal factors by the political leadership. In this respect the Likud is more responsible than Labor. Menachem Begin allowed the Arabs in the territories to have standing before the Supreme Court. Yitzhak Rabin, who served as defense minister during the years of the National Unity Government in the 1980s, complained of interference from Likud Justice Minister Dan Meridor, who insisted upon a proper legal basis for Israel's actions in the territories. These legal constraints may not be entirely new, but they are today given greater consideration than ever before.

Another possible constraint, one difficult to prove, and probably true of most protracted conflicts, is that a growing number among the Israeli political leadership are weary of fighting wars and as a result are less willing to pay the price of casualties which the occasional use of force in the Arab-Israel conflict entails.

Israel also faces a different situation politically than it did when all the Arab states were clearly against Israel and were campaigning for the destruction of the

Jewish state. It was easier for Israel to use force at that time. Nowadays the political considerations are more complex because of the peace treaty with Egypt and the need to consider Egypt's reaction. For example, one of the reasons Ezer Weizman was against attacking the Iraqi nuclear reactor was concern for the Egyptians. The action occurred just a few days after a Sadat-Begin summit. In October 1985 when there was an air attack on the PLO in Tunis, Weizman again was opposed at the time because there were discussions going on with the Jordanians and he was afraid of how the attack would affect the political process. Furthermore, particularly the doves in Israel now consider the use of force as counterproductive to the peace process because it hinders attempts to project an image of moderation.

A final factor may be television coverage, which brings into Israeli living rooms the real impact of what is happening in the field. As in the United States during the Vietnam War, the nightly scenes of Israeli casualties in Lebanon had a major impact. The pictures of Israeli soldiers chasing Arab youngsters in the territories is similarly discouraging the use of force.

These various examples may not signal a major new trend in Israeli political thinking but, taken together,

they do seem indicative of change. Even if each example may be questioned, the accumulation of examples offers a certain pattern that was not characteristic of national security policies in previous periods of Israel history. Apart from that, the research on Israeli leadership opinions toward national security issues and the territories seems to indicate a general trend toward greater moderation or dovishness. Likud and Labor, the center of the political leadership, seem to be moving away from hawkishness. So in this respect, the evidence and analysis offered here on changing attitudes toward the use of force seem to complement the findings of the studies of Israeli leadership positions on national security issues.

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Netanel Lorch, one of Israel's most prominent military historians, served as Secretary General of the Knesset from 1972 to 1983, following a distinguished career in both the Israel Defense Forces and the diplomatic corps. He is a former President of the International Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments.

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