Political Crisis in Israel: a Military Regime within a Democratic State?

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In early May 2016, a political scandal evolved in Israel following the speech of deputy Chief of Staff General Yair Golan on Holocaust Remembrance Day. The words that provoked harsh reactions from Government Ministers (including PM Netanyahu), and right-wing activists in the social media, referred to the explicit comparison of Israel with Nazi Germany: “If there’s something that frightens me about Holocaust remembrance it’s the recognition of the revolting processes that occurred in Europe in general, and particularly in Germany, back then – 70, 80 and 90 years ago – and finding signs of them here among us today in 2016,” he said.1

This event was the climax of an ongoing clash between the military and political elites since the outbreak of what can now be called the ‘Children’s Intifada,’ which erupted in October 2015. This clash stemmed from peculiarities of an extremely unusual regime, which I’ve called elsewhere a Military-democratic regime,2 in which the military is a crucial political actor shaping state policies, frequently more moderate than the political elites, with certain salient exceptions (1967, 2000).3 The relative moderate attitude of the Israeli military (Israel Defense Forces – IDF) stems from the general draft as a nation-in-arms functioning as an occupation army, and their need to legitimize repressive actions in the eyes of peace-supporting soldiers.4 In short, the military needs to legitimize its actions as moral and humanitarian, an almost impossible mission given almost 50 years of military occupation of land inhabited by non-citizen Palestinians, the constant expansion of settlements, and Palestinian resistance.

The strong reactions to General Golan’s speech came as no surprise: he indirectly criticized the Holocaust (Shoah), which is the constitutive myth of Israeli national identity and is constantly used to justify aggressive policies by portraying the Palestinian resistance as antisemitism and even Nazism. According to this myth, Israelis are the victim of Palestinian aggression, violence and terror, without any political or historical context for Israeli actions. In this sense, Golan’s decision to criticize extreme racism and the lack of leadership on Holocaust Remembrance Day and compare ‘us’ to the Germans in the 1930s was, without doubt, a conscious decision to provoke a political debate, usually suffocated by the self-victimization of Israeli society. He could not have guessed in advance that the political turmoil would lead to the dismissal of the Defense Minister (Moshe Yaalon) who publicly sided with him, and his replacement by the most extreme right-wing opponent of the military’s moderate attitudes. This political development is the subject of this article: I will analyze the tension between military and

3 In June 1967, the military pushed the moderate political elites to war and conquest. In October 2000, the military forced the end of political negotiations to halt violence. See GRINBERG, LL. (2010, part 3) Politics and Violence in Israel-Palestine, London: Routledge, 2010.
political elites given the military occupation, giving historical context to the recent political dynamics. Why should the military elites be interested in a political debate of racism and violence against Palestinians? I will start here with a theoretical framing of the peculiar position of the military as a political actor in the Israeli-Palestinian context, I will continue with a brief historical review of military-politics relations, and a brief description of the violence since October 2015.

**Theoretical Framework**

In my view, political actors are individuals, groups, organizations or institutions who aim to influence the decision-making process of the State. There is a salient distinction between three types of political actors in formal democratic regimes: civil society actors, political parties and state institutions. The actors directly responsible for the decision-making process are political parties building coalitions and ruling state institutions. Civil society actors have the legal right to raise collective demands, identities and agendas aimed at mobilizing public support and influencing the official decision makers. State institutional political actors are in the opposite position of civil society: they have a lot of power to directly shape policies, but they don’t have the legitimacy to formally express their political views. Hence they usually ‘hide’ their political views and present them as professional expertise. When the political character of their ‘professional’ viewpoint is uncovered the state institutional political actors might be delegitimized and lose power. Hence they tend to hide their interests as political actors.

In order to open political space (namely recognition and representation), civil society demands depend on two crucial factors: a. the balance of power between civil society groups, which force political actors to represent and mediate conflicts; and b. inclusive borders that facilitate recognition of the other. The use of violence closes the political space; the mediation of conflicts through the representation of grievances opens the space. The attitude of the military towards resistance within the borders of the State is always a political act: it is able to close the political space for negotiations by using repressive violence, but can also refuse to oppress, forcing the opening of political spaces for negotiation. Hence the military always has a crucial political position; the question is when is it required to use violence against ‘internal enemies,’ and what are the chances of succeeding in oppressing resistance? The main concern of the military is to maintain its internal institutional cohesion and hierarchic authority, namely the obedience of soldiers and officers. This obedience depends on the political interpretation of the conflict and the need to use violence against the enemy, in other words the legitimacy of the war. This is also relevant in the public sphere, which is influenced by civil society actors. When the military loses its soldiers’ obedience or that of some of its units, it is weakened vis-à-vis the enemy. This is why, in some contexts, the military elites refuse to repress popular uprisings, refusing to define the groups behind them as ‘enemies.’ Two good examples of the opening of political space for negotiations by the military’s refusal to use violence against internal civil society actors are Tunisia (December 2010) and Egypt (January 2011).

**Historical Background**

The position of the military in the Israeli Occupation is very peculiar. The military is the sovereign authority beyond the internationally recognized borders of Israel (called the 1967 borders, or the green line) but it also separates and demarcates the difference between Israeli citizens (settlers) in the Occupied Territories (OT) and Palestinian non-citizens, protecting the first group from the second. The institutional cohesion of the military regime depends on the military’s behaviour being seen as ‘moral’ in the public sphere, which, in turn, depends on how it is interpreted by the soldiers and officers, and also by Israeli civilians. Since the IDF is based on conscription and the constant service of reservist soldiers, the political debates in the public sphere rapidly penetrate military ranks. Hence, the military is very susceptible to public debates.

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The first time public debate significantly penetrated the IDF was during the first Lebanon War (1982-1985) when the siege of Beirut and the massacre of Sabra and Shatila were harshly criticized by the opposition, provoking unprecedented demonstrations against what was seen as ‘a War of Choice.’ A movement of conscientious objectors appeared for the first time, when reservist soldiers refused to serve in Lebanon. The institutional crisis of the military continued during the first Intifada (December 1987). After several weeks of mass demonstrations by Palestinians and ineffective military oppression, the Chief of Staff declared that “there is no military solution to the Intifada, a political solution is needed.” In other words, the leadership of political elites was needed, because the IDF had no legitimacy to use all the weapons it had in order to oppress Palestinian civil and non-violent resistance. Indeed, the military elite’s inability to use unrestrained violence to oppress the popular revolt led the Defense Minister (Yitzhak Rabin, who refused to dialogue with the Palestinian leadership until 1988), to present his candidacy as PM in the 1992 elections. After his election, Rabin signed a mutual recognition agreement with the PLO in 1993 (called the Declaration of Principles, DoP, or the Oslo Accords) promising a peaceful negotiated agreement between the sides in five years. After Rabin was assassinated by an extremist nationalist in 1995, the leader of the opposition to negotiations and Rabin’s main agitator, Benjamin Netanyahu, was elected as PM.

In this situation, with the moderate political forces fatally wounded, the military entered a period of open political action in order to preserve its institutional cohesion. In the absence of effective opposition to Netanyahu, the military elites became the moderate opposition to the extreme right-wing government. Their goal was (and still is) to continue security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority (PA), laid down by the DoP and the Oslo Accords. The agreements guaranteed security coordination in the OT between the IDF and the police forces of the PA. Netanyahu’s declared policy to revert the peace negotiations endangered the military as an institution and the legitimacy of its actions. The IDF’s attempts to restrain extremist policies were criticized by Netanyahu, who accused the military elites of being “leftists,” and, more specifically, loyal to the Labour Party.

The problem was institutional: since 1994, the IDF’s rule over the OT and protection of the Jewish settlers depends on its cooperation with the PA police; and Netanyahu endangered this rule. This was the case during Netanyahu’s first administration (1996-1999), and this has also been the case since the start of the ‘Children’s Intifada’ in October 2015. The proof that this is a structural problem, and not a question of political loyalty, can be found in the attitude of two prominent Likud leaders, who were nominated by PM Netanyahu as Defence Ministers. The first served during 1996-1999 (Yitzhak Mordechai) and split from the party shortly before the 1999 elections, organizing a new party with his Chief of Staff (1995-1999) - General Amnon Lipkin Shahak. After the elections they became crucial partners in the new government, led by the Labour Party, who nominated another previous Chief of Staff (1991-1995) as PM - Ehud Barak.

The logic of all these members of the military elites was to protect the institutional interests of the military in its complex position in the OT. The

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7 Until 1982, previous wars were considered ‘no choice wars,’ namely wars imposed by the enemy, when Israel had to defend itself, while obviously this was a political construct. See Golani, M. Wars Do Not Just Happen: Memory, Power, Choice, Ben Shemen: Modan (Hebrew), 2002.
8 For the sake of transparency, I must make it clear that I was one of the founding leaders of the Yesh Gvul conscientious objectors movement in July 1982, and the speaker of the movement.
9 Ezrachi, Y. Idem.
same story evolved between February and May 2016, when the crisis became public, and the Li-kud Defence Minister (Moshe Yaalon) offered his open support to the ‘moral attitude’ of the military elites against political agitators. This time, however, the reaction was swift and Yaalon was dismissed in a very humiliating way, and replaced by the harshest opponent of the military’s moderate attitudes, widening the gap between the elites and exacerbating the crisis.

The Current Crisis

Since its unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the IDF has public legitimacy to use violence against the region as an ‘act of defence,’ ignoring the fact that there is an imposed blockade strangling the Gazan economy. Since its last operation in 2014 (‘Protective Edge’), the military has supported easing the blockade and an indirect agreement with the Gazan Hamas government. PM Netanyahu, however, pays no heed to the military’s proposals, creating a situation that might explode at any time. Such a development is expected to create further public frustration and resentment due to the IDF’s incapacity to ‘defeat the enemy,’ in addition to the international critique of the excessive violence used in order to prioritize the lives of Israeli soldiers. In other words, a new violent clash in the Gaza Strip is expected to have similar results to 2008, 2012 and 2014 ‘operations.’ (The new Minister of Defence is famous for his threats to assassinate Hamas’ elected leaders and reoccupy the Gaza Strip).

However, the most open disputes between the military and political elites are over how to maintain control of the new wave of Palestinian violence in the West Bank, the ‘Children’s Intifada.’ Individual acts of violence started in October 2015, mainly carried out by young teenagers, girls and boys, using ‘domestic weapons,’ mainly knives, and sometimes scissors, axes or cars. Almost no guns were used, and no organized military or political organization has claimed responsibility or was identified as being behind the renewed violence. The IDF did not find any regularity regarding the identity of the aggressors, and have no clue as to how to prevent or fight against a completely unorganized, anonymous enemy. Netanyahu is constantly blaming the PA for agitation of the population, while the military elites refute his accusations, arguing that the PA cooperates with the military in an attempt to contain the violence and even prevent concrete attacks when possible. They explain the violence of individuals as acts of despair, given the lack of hope for a better future. In other words, the government’s continuous rejection of any form of political negotiation creates the conditions of despair that push the youth to commit ‘suicidal’ attacks.

Why are the attacks considered practically as suicide? Because there is a de-facto, unconditional license to kill Palestinian aggressors, even after they are neutralized and pose no real danger. This de-facto license to kill and absence of any real investigation into post-attack killings (euphemistically called “neutralizing the terrorist”) became a real threat to the military authority and commands, mainly given public reports by soldiers witnessing disproportionate violence used by other soldiers (mainly through a reservist soldier organization called ‘Breaking the Silence,’11 Shovrim Shtika) and reports by human rights organizations. Here is the threat to the military cohesion and hierarchic authority: on the one hand soldiers can carry out extrajudicial executions of Palestinian attackers even if there is no real threat, and on the other hand, soldiers witnessing these killings might become too critical, publish their testimony and even refuse to serve in the military.

11 www.breakingthesilence.org.il/
This was the context of the May 2016 crisis that led to the change of the composition of the coalition, leading to an even more extremist and violent government through the nomination of Avigdor Lieberman (head of the party ‘Israel Is Our Home’ – Yisrael Beiteinu), as Defence Minister. The context is the military’s fear of losing its image as a ‘moral’ institution in the eyes of moderate soldiers and public opinion. It started with a speech by the Chief of Staff (17 February, 2016) when he warned soldiers not to kill “13-year-old girls armed with scissors,” provoking strong reactions and criticisms from ministers and coalition government supporters. It continued with the viral spread of the video of a soldier shooting a wounded Palestinian terrorist in Hebron (24 March, 2016)12, and the immediate arrest and investigation of the soldier, who was charged with murder. The soldier’s arrest sparked a huge mobilization against the military authorities, with the soldier hailed as “our hero.” One of the most outspoken critics against the IDF’s arrest and trial of the soldier was the leader of ‘Israel Our Home,’ KM Avigdor Lieberman. This is the context for the speech given by the deputy Chief of Staff on Holocaust Remembrance Day, which ultimately led to the dismissal of the Defence Minister (who supported the military elites’ ‘moral’ attitude) and the nomination of Lieberman to replace Yaalon.

Conclusion

The deterioration of the Israeli political discourse and the establishment of an extreme nationalist coalition in May 2016 are the result of the contradiction between two opposing goals of the Israeli regime: a. to maintain the military rule over non-citizen Palestinians, and b. to maintain the ‘moral image’ of the military in Israeli public opinion. In order to maintain the military occupation, the IDF needs the PA’s cooperation, and in order to maintain its ‘moral image’ it needs the continued action of human rights organizations and the soldiers’ reports, which are used to ‘discipline’ soldiers. Since the beginning of the Children’s Intifada the government blamed the PA and Human Rights organizations; in February-May the clash was open against the military elites.

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The current goal of PM Netanyahu is to ‘discipline’ the military and transform it into an effective tool of oppression, probably further damaging cooperation with the PA and deteriorating the military’s ‘moral image.’ In this situation some people are expecting retired military leaders to take the political lead against Netanyahu, as they did in 1999. This may happen, but, given the internal contradictions of the Israeli military-democratic regime, my analysis suggests that the IDF might lose its institutional cohesion and its capacity to function as a moderating political actor.

12 www.btselem.org/video/20160324_soldier_executes_palestinians_attacker_in_hebron