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The Changing of the Guard in the IDF

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The much-publicized conflict between the Minister of Defense and the outgoing IDF Chief of Staff, as well as the drama surrounding the appointment of the new Chief of Staff, diverted public attention from the critical question of the state of the IDF today compared to its state four years ago, when Gabi Ashkenazi assumed Israel's highest military post. Five points are particularly noteworthy.

First of all, the past four year period has been among the most peaceful the country has ever known. The northern border, the West Bank, and in fact all of Israel's borders – including the Gaza Strip region since Operation Cast Lead – were calm sectors with few incidents. While it is true that there are external explanations for the calm, there is no doubt that the quality of the IDF's activity and operational discipline contributed to this state of affairs.

Second, by virtually every known parameter, the army's preparedness has improved dramatically. Reservists are training more, and their training is of better quality. The army has undertaken major re-equipment processes. The frequency of drills and exercises of the upper echelons has increased, and operational plans, some of which were buried deep in the drawer when the Second Lebanon War broke out, have been reformulated and brought up to date so that they are ready for implementation.

Third, the IDF's five year program, "Tefen," is now entering its fourth year. Unlike the past, it is actually progressing according to plan – and to budget. Without a doubt, this has been aided by the IDF's adoption of the Brodet Commission's recommendations and the increase in the defense budget, but smart management of the defense budget – the biggest of all government budgets – has also been a factor.

Fourth, the IDF's operational activities have, as far as we know, been successful. Operation Cast Lead was a successful military operation; the attack on the Syrian reactor, if indeed carried out by the IDF, was an impressive operation; we are unaware of many operational mishaps or multi-casualty incidents; and even the operation to take control of the Turkish flotilla, which caused considerable political and propaganda damage, was not

terrible if measured by the yardstick of military and strategic results (the fact is that Israel has not been challenged by another flotilla since then).

Finally, the sense of security and morale is high among the public in general and within the IDF in particular, as evidenced by increased volunteering for combat units.

These impressive achievements are qualified by two issues. First, the true preparedness of the army is in reality an unknown. It can only be measured by its response to war. Preparedness is not an objective or quantitative concept; rather, it is contextual. In military doctrine there is no paragraph assessing the net total of one side's strength; rather, there is a paragraph called "relative force," assessing one side's strength relative to a given enemy's strength in a given scenario.

After the Second Lebanon War and the lapses that were exposed, particularly in ground fighting, Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi decided that it was time to "go back to the basics" and pay more attention to improving ground maneuver capabilities of the large land based formations. Was this indeed what was important? If we take the same arena – Lebanon – as an example, it is true that had the IDF undertaken a rapid, multi-division operation to the Litani River in the first few days of the Second Lebanon War, it would have been able to undermine the core of Hizbollah's strength. However, if in the next confrontation the IDF undertakes a similar move, it may turn out to be less effective, since today most of the rocket launchers are north of the Litani. Thus, the test is not an abstract level of preparedness, but rather preparedness as proven by events still in the future. This cannot be assessed, especially not ahead of time.

The second qualification is the atmosphere in the army, especially in the upper echelons. While morale and self-confidence are up, the atmosphere in the upper levels is not one that is open to critique or creativity. In the first two years of his term, Chief of Staff Ashkenazi worked – and rightly so – to rehabilitate the military by emphasizing discipline, leaving little room for multiple opinions. In the latter two years of Ashkenazi's term, however, there should have been room for more openness but this did not materialize. One of the most serious risks in an army (especially at the General Staff level) is groupthink, and it seems that not enough attention was paid to this possible pitfall.

In conclusion, the IDF has undergone an impressive change for the better in the last four years. Not all of the change is attributable to Lt. Gen. Ashkenazi, but as someone who was capable of saying that the buck stops here ("it happened on my watch"), it is only right to give the outgoing Chief of Staff much of the credit for the many positive steps.

One last word: The changing of the guard ceremony, when Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz took over as IDF Chief of Staff, was also attended by Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States military. This was not only a nice gesture but also just one example of the extraordinarily good relations Chief of Staff Ashkenazi fostered with other chiefs of staff, including regionally (Egypt, Jordan) and in Europe.

While the importance of these relations, based on trust and respect, is far greater in the daily activities of the military than is readily apparent, its effect during crises is inestimable. In this sense, the outgoing Chief of Staff proved that he is not merely a good soldier but also a highly capable military statesman.