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Israel's Incoming Defense Minister and the Hundred-Day Grace Period

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Although it is often claimed that a new minister does not have a single day to "learn the job," incoming Defense Minister Lt. Gen. (ret.) Moshe (Bogie) Yaalon will in fact have 100 days of grace. Accordingly, it is important that he devote this period to an in-depth study of the significant – and at times existential – challenges he will confront as Defense Minister. Minister Yaalon understands the importance of constantly studying the issues. As a member of his General Staff, I was a participant in his weekly brain trust, a small and intimate forum that allowed the chief of staff to conduct a multidimensional, in-depth inquiry that offered him different perspectives and helped him formulate an appropriate and up-to-date policy in the face of a changing situation. The Defense Minister heads and manages the defense establishment, the largest institution in the public sector, but he is also a senior member of the political-security cabinet, where fateful decisions will be made in the coming years. Minister Yaalon will be the minister with the richest military-defense experience in the cabinet, where some members lack familiarity and experience with crucial issues of national security, and this situation places a heavy responsibility on him.

Dozens of important issues await a decision by the new Defense Minister. Many people will try to advance the issues they deem critical and will attempt to persuade the Minister to hold discussions on particular subjects, from the border of the Golan Heights to the border with Egypt, from drafting the ultra-Orthodox to the performance of the Iron Dome. However, proper leadership in the Defense Ministry requires a focus on the main issues, the issues fateful for the future of the State of Israel. It is important for Minister Yaalon to avoid the natural tendency of a former chief of staff who becomes Defense Minister to act as a meta-chief of staff. It is correct to leave the command and ongoing management of the IDF to Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, who is experienced, professional, and thoughtful. It is appropriate to leave the ongoing administration of the Defense Ministry and defense industries to the director general, and focus instead on the three leading issues on Israel's national security agenda: the Iranian nuclear program, the defense budget and IDF force development, and the borders of the State of Israel.

The new Defense Minister has at least 100 days before he must decide what his recommendation is to the government on the issue of stopping Iran's nuclear program. The decision will be heavily influenced by the outcome of the meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The Prime Minister will likely be prepared to wait at least a number of months before again raising the issue of an attack on Iran. The Defense Minister is known to believe that an attack on Iran is less dangerous than an Iran with military nuclear capability. However, anyone who chooses the military option against Iran must ensure that the following essential conditions have been met:

- a. All the other alternatives for stopping Iran (a negotiated agreement, sanctions that will change Iran's behavior, a covert campaign, and regime change) have been exhausted but have failed to arrest the program.
- b. The Israeli operational plan will cause a significant delay in Iran's program
- c. The United States and Israel are acting on the basis of a joint strategic platform that leads to operative cooperation, or at least similar understandings of the strategic situation – on the day of the action, in the conflict that will take place after it, and even in the coming decade, when it will be necessary to continue to stop Iran with a coordinated joint strategy.

In this context, it is important to preserve the Defense Minister's special ties with the upper echelons of the US administration, a prized relationship in the realm of security that should be maintained and even expanded to the realm of diplomacy, where the traditional channels do not always work as expected.

Having served as chief of staff, Minister Yaalon well knows that decisions on force development will affect the ability of the IDF decades into the future. Discussions on the budget will force the new minister to make decisions. There is no doubt that a process of streamlining and reexamination will be needed in the defense establishment. But even here, it is preferable to engage in a learning process and not to be dragged into decisions prematurely under pressure dictated by budgetary discussions. It is important for the Minister to start a professional public debate on the achievements required of the IDF. The public's expectation of a "crushing victory in six days without damage to the civilian routine" is not realistic. The necessary cuts in the IDF budget will require decisions that will perforce offer only partial solutions to many security issues. It is important to continue to maintain generic and versatile operational capabilities that provide a response to all types of expected conflicts: terrorism, the threats from traditional armies, nuclear programs in third tier countries, and hybrid threats that combine advanced state capabilities such as surface-to-surface missiles and advanced air defense with non-state terrorist activity. The budget of the defense establishment and the IDF will also be a function of the decision whether to attack Iran and preparedness for the conflict that

would come in its wake. A country that launches an operation that can expand into a war does not cut its defense budget.

The third topic is perhaps the most important, but here too it is worthwhile taking at least 100 days to deliberate the shape of the borders of the State of Israel as a secure and legitimate Jewish democratic state. Minister Yaalon is known for his lack of trust in the Palestinians and their readiness to reach a peace agreement that would include “an end to the conflict and an end to all claims,” and the rejection of the “right of return.” Even if Minister Yaalon is correct in his assessment, the Palestinians must not be allowed to foil the two-state solution, and Israel must advance toward it in measured and coordinated steps. Minister Yaalon is known to have opposed the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza under the pressure of terrorism. The good news is that terrorism from Judea and Samaria has been eliminated and is at its lowest point in the past ten years. The Minister would do well to discuss an historic move to shape the eastern border of the State of Israel with coordinated unilateral measures, which even if not agreed upon results in a safe and legitimate border that allows Israel to permanently maintain its identity as a Jewish and democratic state.

The incoming Defense Minister and I were young commanders in the Yom Kippur War. Bogey was a reserve sergeant in a paratrooper unit, and I was a young pilot in a fighter squadron. We served together in the General Staff of the IDF thirty years later. Today the responsibility for Israel’s security at the highest level rests on his shoulders. This is a national responsibility, not based on political party, and the citizens of Israel all wish him tremendous success, as this is essential for our existence and our wellbeing.

