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Inside the Israel Defense Forces: A Clash Over Israeli-Jewish Identity

Based on an article by Uri Blau, Ha'Aretz, May 10.

Israel's Defense Forces (IDF) have always been an important element in the fusing of Israel society by promoting Israeli-Jewish identity. The IDF Education and Youth Corps have an Israeli-Jewish identity Unit for the task. At the same time, the IDF Rabbinate promotes conversion to Judaism among non-Jewish soldiers with special-privileges courses and promises of social and material benefits.

The IDF guidelines on Israeli-Jewish identity, under the direction of Maj. Gen. Elazar Stern, former head of the Personnel Directorate, in conjunction with Benjamin Ish-Shalom, a professor of Jewish philosophy. Ish-Shalom's program sought to strengthen Jewish values and multiculturalism: "A people must be connected to its culture and its roots."

A Jewish Army

Stern: "This is an army of a Jewish state. At the same time, if the army wants to avert a culture war and be liberal and fair, its obligation is to pursue the path of pluralistic Jewish consciousness. It follows that if the IDF rabbinate pursues a totally Orthodox agenda, it cannot be entrusted with the whole project." One of the goals of the Education Corps became involved with Jewish identity in recent years is to counter the IDF rabbinate's intensive activity in this realm. Infighting between the two bodies continues.

The Military Rabbinate started dealing with "Jewish consciousness" in 2001. Rabbi Avichai Rontzki was appointed IDF Chief Rabbi. Before taking up the position, Rontzki met with Chief of Staff Dan Halutz and told him what to expect. "I did not come to pull the wool over anyone's eyes. I

came to the Military Rabbinate from civilian life with a number of goals, the main one being to promote Jewish identity, which would be the rabbinate's hallmark." He diverted the bulk of the rabbinate's budget to this objective and enlisted his best people – "based on the viewpoint that

in order to defeat our enemies, which is the army's goal, what's needed is less pluralism and more Jewish consciousness."

The Military Rabbinate's approach is also reflected in the pamphlets it regularly distributes to soldiers. One article, titled "Specifying the Borders of the Land," states: "The land and its borders are not only a technical framework but a breeding ground for the special qualities of the nation, which

are manifested in the territory itself."



Another pamphlet notes that, "Jerusalem is the eternal city, and at its center, in the place of the Temple Mount and the Holy of Holies, is the foundation stone – the foundation from which the world was formed, where the binding of Isaac took place – and in the heart of the city the Temple was built. Thanks to its strength we were privileged to renew our state, and we shall succeed in triumphing in all confrontations; we shall harmoniously conduct the orchestra of the Creation and we shall continue to move forward and rise transcendent for all eternity!"

As of March 2009, unit commanders were charged with educating soldiers, inculcating moral resilience, and instilling Jewish heritage and Israeli-Jewish identity. The Education Corps was tasked with determining policy and developing programs and tools for these purposes, and given professional responsibility for Israeli-Jewish identity. The Military Rabbinate, for its part, authorized to set policy and develop programs and tools dealing with religious subjects. Content relating to Jewish consciousness would be integrated into seminars dealing with Israeli-Jewish identity, values and the spirit of combat, of which the Education Corps was in charge.

These stipulations have largely remained on paper, according to the latest State Comptroller's report. "Rontzki came in with an agenda based on the Military Rabbinate's role extending beyond religious tasks and encompassing intellectual subjects," says Col. (res.) Motti Shalem, who was in charge of the IDF's educational training base in the 1990s and is now director of the program for the development of educational leadership at the Mandel Institute in Jerusalem.

Zamir submitted a document to present Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, calling for a halt to growing religious extremism in the army and for a realignment of religious-secular relations. Similar concern is voiced by Col. (res.) Roni Sulimani. The major issue, Sulimani says, is "who determines what Israeli-Jewish identity is in this country and what the army's role is in that regard. We are constantly affected by that tension, and because the IDF is one of the last public institutions where one can truly exert influence, it has become a playground for those who are so inclined ... When it comes to identity, on no account should we endeavor to define the proper identity for individuals. I want to preserve a situation in which everyone will have the right to his own opinion ... Some do not share this viewpoint and think there are answers to the question related to Jewish identity. They have begun to introduce their agenda into the army. I waged a bitter struggle against that. I did not want them to dictate what the army should look like intellectually."

Ethics and Codes

Sulimani initiated IDF cooperation with pluralistic organizations such as Bina (the Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture) and Alma, the Home for Hebrew Culture. Eran Baruch, the executive director of Bina and the head of its secular yeshiva, has been working with the IDF for

more than two years, and says he has high regard for the activity of the chief education officer.



“In a very determined and straightforward way,” Baruch says, “he is trying to promote the presentation of the broadest possible pluralism in the army, and it’s not easy. We grew up with the notion that the religion ‘belongs’ to someone; to come with a complex conception and present as broad a picture as possible is rather than simple, high-minded answers, is not a self-evident position.” Of course, this is especially true of young men and women in the process of forming their identities.

Concurrent with promoting cooperation with pluralistic groups, Sulimani says, organizations that worked with the IDF without supervision were monitored. Every organization that provided services to the Education Corps had to agree to follow a code. The code stipulates, for example, that a lecturer must not incite or advocate a particular political approach, proselytize for any religion or voice racist opinions.

“As soon as I introduced pluralism, I came under attack,” he says. “And not only from the rabbinate – from commanding officers, too.”

Former IDF Personnel Directorate chief Zamir discloses for the first time that he reprimanded Rabbi Ben-Artzi, of the Jewish consciousness unit, for his activity. “The first time someone in the rabbinate exceeded his,” Zamir says, “I called him in for a reprimand. He was informed that if he continued in this vein he would leave the IDF.” According to Zamir, Ben-Artzi did not cooperate.

Fall in Line!

IDF’s “Mission and Distinctiveness” document states: “The IDF will carry out its missions optimally if its soldiers will be imbued with a solid feeling of national identity and understand the meaning of being soldiers in the army of the State of Israel – a democratic Jewish state – and the limitations that devolve on them in executing the missions.”

The document notes that the young people serving are at a critical stage in their life, which will influence their future development as human beings and as citizens of the state. “Because the army is a hierarchical organization, and service is prolonged and intensive, it has the power to influence the soldiers significantly.” “The army cannot force values upon soldiers, and therefore must be pluralistic,” Prof. Stern says.

“But that does not mean it has to be devoid of values. The Education Corps should be headed by people whose relative advantage is their cultural breadth – or at least an appreciation of cultural breadth.” However, since this is an educational endeavor taken up by the military, there are limits to the breadth of discussion encouraged. There is, for example, no presentation of the Arab Palestinian point of view, nor of Israeli politicians and thinkers who do reflect a right-wing position.

“Our lectures are carefully monitored,” says a lecturer from one of the more pluralistic institutes that works with the army. In a talk about freedom, for example, lecturers were asked

to ensure “that the messages are not overly ‘subversive.’ ” His organization, he says, “is very much afraid of a breakdown [in ties with the army] due to controversial statements, and for the same reason, I assume, we do not get to places where there is a large concentration of religiously-observant people ... We were told that the speakers must have a ‘clean record’ and no skeletons in their closet.”

An instructor from Beit Morasha notes, “We strove for substantive pluralism and tried to open the floor to tough questions, from refusal to serve to the encounter with Palestinian refugees, “referencing a booklet which dealt with this subject and was banned.

Soldiers and officers who took part in educational army activities were also critical. An educational leadership workshop in Jerusalem, which is compulsory for Jewish and non-Jewish officers from intermediate rank (captain) to brigadier general, has two central axes: Israeli-Jewish identity and educational-officer identity.

An officer who recently participated in the workshop noted that the event heightened the dissonance that exists for non-Jewish officers. What bothered him most was the fact that most of the instructors in the workshop were religiously observant and used terminology “of a national-religious, even nationalist thrust ... When the discussion touched on Arabs – not necessarily even Palestinians – it was stopped,” he says.

A New Demography in Israel?

Israel is increasingly faced with a new reality. Thousands of Africans, mainly from Eritrea, Sudan and Somali are braving the Sinai desert, the Egyptian Army, vicious Bedouin smugglers and the Israeli border patrol in an effort to improve their living conditions and find work in Israel. Hit by drought, wars, unstable economies and often vicious governments, they are reaching out for a better life. Some 60,000 of them – others estimate the number at 100,000 – have already entered the country and hundreds of thousands more are poised to make the journey.



These illegal immigrants have overrun large sections of Israeli cities, increasing crime, drug use and social instability.

The majority are not refugees according to UN regulations; they are in no danger of life or limb in their home countries. But they impose a heavy toll on Israeli society and the Israeli economy, driving wages down while burdening the educational and health services. They do not pay taxes or purchase medical insurance, play no role in the defense of the country and make no contribution to society.

For the last few years, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Government simply ignored the problem, until tensions were created and protests began in various cities following a rash of rapes. Netanyahu has now ordered his ministers to take steps toward the deportation of citizens of South Sudan, the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Ethiopia.

Netanyahu explained that it will not, at this stage, be possible to expel citizens of Eritrea and Sudan, whose lives would be at risk in their home countries. Therefore, holding facilities for

them will be built as quickly as possible, but they must not be allowed to work.

"Whoever can be sent away should be sent as quickly as possible." He also ordered the creation of a team of interrogators to interview those brought to the holding facility, to determine whether they are entitled to refugee status. Individuals entitled to such status will be treated as such.

For several months, the Foreign Ministry has conducted intensive discussions with the governments of those countries whose citizens can be repatriated, a senior ministry source said. Israel is exerting heavy pressure on Ethiopia to begin repatriating its citizens. The Foreign Ministry has also been in contact with South Sudan. On June 17, some 200 South Sudanese will fly from Israel to Juba, the South Sudan capital. In mid-July there will be another such flight. A senior Foreign Ministry source said that Israel has made it clear to countries like the Ivory Coast and Ghana that the government plans to deport their nationals, by force if necessary, and that if their governments refuse to issue travel documents, Israel will do so. Israeli diplomats have inquired with 30 African and 10 Western countries as to their willingness to receive these immigrants, but were categorically refused.

Syria

More background to the conflict in Syria might be helpful: Alawis, a breakaway Shi'ite sect, constitute some 10% of the Syrian population, while the majority are Sunni, as are the majority in Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah are Shi'ite. Lebanon has a small Muslim majority, a large Christian Maronite minority and a small Druze minority. Iraq is divided between Sunnis and Shi'ites, with a significant Druze minority, most of which resides in Iraq's oil-rich region, bordering Syria. Al Qaida is Sunni, as is the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. A measurable Kurdish minority lives on the borders of Syria with Turkey and Iraq, spilling over to Iran. The Kurds aspire to political independence, a running sore to all three countries. The most militant of the Kurds are in Turkey. They have been engaged in a running war with the Turkish authorities for decades.



Like many of the Arab countries, Syria has been hit by the world's economic slump and rising food costs, giving rise to the so-called Arab Spring. Coupled with this, Syria suffers from high youth unemployment, leading to increased frustration. Average unemployment in Syria is 4%. Among Syria's youth it is 24%. Nowadays, young people constitute 77% of the unemployed in the country. In addition, 77% of these have been on the job market for over a year while labor supply rate is a mere 55 per annum and the population increase is significantly higher. As a result, the country's standard of living has dropped at the same time that the Government was forced by the economy to reduce State food subsidies and social services.

Nor do the people have an effective means to vent their frustration or labor for a better future. Political parties are banned. Freedoms of expression, association and assembly are controlled. Thousands have been harassed and imprisoned. Amazon, FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia were blocked until January 2011. To date all Internet cafes must control and record online chats.

Alawis are accorded the best jobs, the most prominent positions in Government and the military. Thousands of Kurds were denied citizenship until 2011, and close to half remain without citizenship to this day.

Iran, Syria and Hezbollah have cooperated through the years and have vested interests in each other's survival. The forces operating today in Syria against the Government are united only in their opposition to Alawi control. While they are all Sunni; they are divided by other sectarian interests: some are secular to the extent that their culture is Muslim, but they do not want Sharia Law to determine their freedoms. Others are more radical in their religious beliefs. The splintered Syrian opposition has been infiltrated by Al Qaida, the Muslim Brotherhood and other unknown entities.

Hafez Assad, the father of the present ruler, Bashar, led the country with an iron hand. In 1976, he ordered a scorched earth operation against Sunni Muslim opposition in the city of Hama, led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Rifaat al-Assad, President Bashar's brother, conducted the operation, described by Robin Wright (*Dreams and Shadows: the Future of the Middle East*. Penguin, 2008) as "the single deadliest acts by any Arab government against its own people in the modern Middle East." Estimates of the number of civilians killed vary between 20,000 and 40,000, the latter number being provided by the Syrian Human Rights Committee. Large sections of the city were razed to the ground.



Hama 1976

The present regime is fighting for its life. Failure to suppress the revolt is liable to result in a bloodbath and fiercely suppressed anger gains the upper hand. Iran and the Hezbollah realize that the loss of a Syrian ally will weaken their hand, creating a wedge where they now have a bridge, reducing pressure on Israel and exposing Hezbollah's flank, as well as a large part of Iran's northern border. They, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan also realize that if Syria

disintegrates, the chaos is likely to spread to each of these countries, who have similarly fractured societies made up of the same tribal and sectarian components.

Egypt

The Tahrir Square Revolution, headed by young, ambitious, democratically-minded Egyptians, has been stolen. Free and fair elections, held under the eye of the interim military government in Egypt, led to a radical Muslim Parliament, with the Muslim Brotherhood and the more extreme Salafists gaining an overwhelming majority. The young protestors of Tahrir Square were horrified. In response, when faced with the option of election a weak secularist, a Muslim Brotherhood member or a one-time Commander of Egypt's Air Force and a former Prime Minister in deposed Hosni Mubarak's government, they opted for the latter. In the run-off elections, former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq will run against Muhamad Mursi, who promised to resign his Muslim Brotherhood membership he wins, but who enjoys the energetic support of the Brotherhood.

So, the young people are faced with Hobson's choice: either more of the same under stringent Muslim rule, or possibly more of the same under a moderately Muslim regime that has the support of the military.

Safiq has claimed his Islamist rival would drag Egypt into the dark ages and threaten the rights of women, Christians and other minorities. "I represent a civil state, the Brotherhood represents a sectarian Brotherhood state. I represent moving forward, they represent going backwards," he said. He accused the Brotherhood of making a power grab despite its promise not to run for the presidency, after the organization also won more parliamentary seats than it originally said it would seek. He suggested Mursi would answer to religious leaders rather than to the people. "Choose a president of Egypt who will make a country for everyone, and not for one sect," he said, adding he was reaching out to every political power "even if it disagrees" with him. Shafiq insisted he would not rebuild the old order. There could be no return to jailing people for their views and corruption would be stamped out. As a former military man, he is seen by many Egyptians as having the army's backing to help restore order after almost 16 months of turmoil.

"We will work immediately to restore security," he said promising poor farmers he would ensure fair prices for their produce, cancel their debts to state banks and provide them with health insurance. Several of his campaign offices have been attacked, and many protesters have hit the streets to demonstrate against both candidates.

Muhamad Mursi, former Chairman of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party, has taken up the cry, "The Quran is our constitution, the prophet is our leader." Recently he has sought to appeal to political liberals and minorities, describing Shafiq as a Mubarak-era holdover. In the past, according to the right-wing Gatestone Institute, when Mursi was asked his opinion of Egyptian Coptic Christians, he responded by saying that "they need to know that conquest is coming, and Egypt will be Islamic, and that they must pay the Islamic capita tax or emigrate." However, he is the only candidate wholly unassociated with the former hated regime, and his Islamic credentials appeal both to Egyptian national identity and to the uneducated religious masses.

The run-off elections are due June 16-17. Meanwhile, yesterday (June 16), Egypt's Supreme Court cancelled recent elections results to the parliament, raising ire in the streets and putting the Islamic parliamentary majority in the balance. Mursi expressed his dissatisfaction with the Court's decision, but called on the public to accept it. Is this a political ploy as elections loom, or is it a sincere expression of conviction?

Deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was found guilty of inaction that led to the deaths of protestors, who eventually brought him down. He was sentenced to prison for life. Since then, his health has deteriorated. Reports are contradictory, but he is said to have slipped into a coma and been moved to the prison medical facility.

Jordan at a Crossroads

Based on an article in Yediot Achronot, June 5 2013 By Dr. Yaron Friedman

Dr Friedman is a graduate of the Sorbonne. He teaches Arabic and lectures about Islam at the Technion, at Beit HaGefen in Haifa and at the Galilee Academic College.

Abdullah's regime is facing a critical crossroads. Jordan is one of the first countries where Arab Spring riots broke out. To date, King Abdullah II has managed to contain the revolution.

Jordan's king enjoys special Muslim prestige because of his Hashemite ancestry (said to be of the Prophet's lineage) and the fact that the Jordanian royal house permits Muslim Brotherhood activity. It is the only regime among Arab regimes that do so, apart from Egypt following the fall of President Mubarak. Abdullah responded to riots with caution: He promised social, governmental and economic reforms – easier said than done, as indicated by the consecutive replacement of three prime ministers in a short space of time. Abdullah's own throne is threatened: the reforms demanded would transform the royal house into a symbolic body only, like Britain's royal house.

The most stable Arab regimes at this time are the royal houses of Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Jordan and the Principalities (the Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar.) Bahrain is an exception because of its impassioned Shiite majority. Yet Jordan is the most sensitive because of the economic distress and high unemployment rate. Privatization and the failure of the king's economic policy have provoked unrest among some of his traditional supporters, who joined the protest against corruption and rising prices. Jordan lacks natural resources; the kingdom is economically unsustainable and therefore dependent on foreign aid, mostly from the United States

Jordan's royal house relies on native Jordanians and Bedouin tribes, while the Islamic movement's power has grown. The Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, is the country's largest and best organized party. In 2003, the party won almost 25% of parliamentary seats. The movement's leader is Hammam Said. Said is a Palestinian who represents the radical sector of the movement. Jordan has experienced a series of uprising and attempted coups initiated by Palestinians.

The Action Front had boycotted elections for six years in the wake of the peace treaty with Israel. Recently, the Front showcased its power by bringing thousands of supporters onto the streets, calling for social justice, democratization and a termination of the peace treaty with Israel. The Islamic movement's demand for democratization is a veneer for its desire to take over the country via elections, as may well happen in Egypt.

In a bid to bridge the gaps, King Abdullah met with The Hamman Said and with Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashaal. His efforts have not prompted a change in the Muslim Brotherhood's position.

Apparently, the king has decided to take action, following which he appointed the conservative Fayez al-Tarawneh as temporary Prime Minister. Tarawneh served as Prime Minister and Defense Minister under King Hussein, was a member of the team that negotiated peace with Israel and is in support of the treaty. Regime thugs played an active role in dispersing the latest protests and some Muslim Brotherhood offices were torched by unidentified persons in several cities. At the same time, Jordanian security forces were significantly reinforced to prepare for further escalation. Jordan's security apparatuses are the means of the king's ongoing survival. The Muslim Brotherhood's demand for separation of powers and newly-limited authority for Jordan's internal security services betray its desire to operate freely, without any monitoring of its activities.

Will the king continue his restraint, allowing the Muslim Brotherhood and the country's Palestinian majority to further strengthen its position, or will he show a strong hand, as did his father in 1970, forcibly routing Palestinian aspirations for control of the kingdom?

Netanyahu May Bolt From His Own Party

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has had the rug pulled from under his political feet. His party has been taken over by extreme right-wingers, headed by Moshe Feiglin and other West Bank settlers.

Faced with the Supreme Court decision, Netanyahu has vowed to remove five houses built on private Palestinian land. This has become a test case for the PM and his party opposition. Coalition chairman and Likud whip MK Ze'ev Elkin had submitted a bill that aimed to override the Supreme Court decision and legalize any structures built on Palestinian land. He called on Likud colleagues to support the bill and thereby diminish the authority of the High Court of Justice, repeatedly viewed by the Right as an obstacle to the accomplishment of their nationalistic goals.

Netanyahu opposed the bill and threatened to fire any Cabinet member who voted for it. In response, he was described as veering "toward the left." Feiglin threatened in response that Cabinet Ministers who fail to support the bill would forfeit the political support of settlers and of the right of the party. Since Likud's candidates for Knesset membership are chosen by the party convention, this is a grievous threat to any Likud politician. Hundreds of SMS messages with similar intimations were sent to Likud Cabinet Members, while a \$500,000 newspaper campaign was launched. The bill was defeated. No Cabinet minister supported it.



PM Netanyahu

Moshe Feiglin

The PM, also head of his Likud party, has declined to hold party conventions for fear that his weakness in the party would be exposed and resolutions he opposes would be adopted.

Apparently, one of the reasons Netanyahu wanted the former opposition party, Kadimah, in Government was to offset the growing political clout of these right-wingers in the Likud, the Knesset (Israel's Parliament) and in Government.

Stubborn rumors insist that the PM is planning a major political move: either Kadimah and the tiny faction led by the highly-unpopular Ehud Barak will join the Likud and form a new majority in that party, or Netanyahu would break away from the Likud and, in cooperation with the two parties, form a new one. It remains to be seen what Netanyahu will do. Meanwhile, he has committed to building 300 new homes in lieu of the five removed at the Supreme Court's instructions.

Ministry and Family News

There is little new to report. Baruch has been extremely busy, working on the second draft of his thesis, upgrading the Maoz Website, preaching and teaching in the church, working on his Romans commentary and preparing for a month-long visit from the **Erez family (Avital & Co.)**.

Noam has achieved the formal age of adulthood, according to Jewish custom. **Marcus** was promoted at his work in Boeing, and **Keith and Shlomit** are buying a house in Cleveland. **Rose** is working hard. We are well, and grateful to the Lord for his goodness – and for all of you who pray for us.

The next **MaozNews** is expected to carry more news, as well as another installment of Baruch's autobiography. We are surprised by, but grateful to the many who have written to express their interest in this latter section of our newsletter.

Help us get the world out:

Baruch's devotional commentary, *Malachi: A Prophet in Times of Distress* is available for Crossbooks, Amazon, Barnes and Noble and the Christian bookshop near you.

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