

Command and Authority in the IDF: The Winograd Challenge

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Whoever casts a discerning eye over the Winograd Commission interim report will uncover a minefield of puzzling questions. It would be enough to point to the conclusions of the Commission regarding decision making processes, which in most cases reflect a simplistic approach to the human and psychological processes embedded in a decision.¹ Elsewhere in the report the Commission implicitly asserts its own position regarding the decisions that led Israel to the Second Lebanon War.² However on one matter the Commission exceeds all boundaries – when it delivers its far-reaching pronouncement on the concept of the authority of command in the IDF. On this issue the Commission wrote:

It is important to stress that the supreme loyalty of professionals must be to their profession and to their duties, not to their superiors or the organization they serve. To be sure, a commitment to superiors and commanders and to the organization in which a person works is an important component of the professional ethos. A measure of trust and faithfulness between people working together is essential to the proper functioning of any team or organization. It is always preferable to begin by alerting and deliberating within the organization by using accepted practices. However, when in the opinion of professionals the person in charge or the organization is acting in a manner liable to cause actual damage, they must warn others and not shy away from a confrontation with their superiors. In the event of serious damage that harbors dangerous consequences, it is the obligation of professionals to warn the higher echelons of authority.³

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One must not minimize the importance of internal discussion and dialogue within the IDF, yet here the ruling of the Commission raises a significant challenge to future IDF commanders. This article seeks to examine the far-reaching implications of the Commission's statements regarding authority of command within the IDF. It will argue that the Commission's approach is extremely problematic, and if implemented, is liable to harm significantly the ability of the IDF to function as an effective military organization.

One of the most basic foundations of the military is the concept of command and chain of command. Obedience based on a hierarchy of command is the cornerstone of any military organization. As to the IDF, "an ominous pattern has been evident for years: command procedures in the IDF have become more and more like work procedures in bureaucratic civilian organizations, and less like those necessary in a military hierarchy environment."⁴ Military culture demands the existence of an official as the source of authority at any given time. It should always be remembered that the tasks imposed on the IDF (and on any military organization) are imposed on commanders who are allotted resources to complete them. These commanders are *personally* responsible and accountable for the tasks. At the top of this hierarchy is the chief of staff, commander of the IDF, who is given the authority to call all of the army's resources into action. Each commander is naturally assisted by a headquarters to exercise his authority; however, the headquarters itself has no command authority.

Over the years we have been witness to a continued blurring of the personal authority of the commander, brought about by common discourse that places the organization

or the headquarters – instead of the person at the helm – at the center. This is by no means a question of semantics; it is a manifestation of an ongoing process of the shedding of the *personal* responsibility of commanders in favor of the fuzzy notion of organizational responsibility or the headquarters' responsibility. Consequently, debates in the IDF and in the public discourse include statements such as, "The position of the army is..." or "The air force's position is..." and so forth. Yet the hierarchal structure of military command is by nature and in essence a personal hierarchy that flows from the fundamental principle of decentralized authority, from the chief of staff as commander of the army to subordinate commanders. As such, it decidedly does not recognize the concept of authority and responsibility of organizations or headquarters. Authority is personal and by nature is sufficient to carry out a given task. In the same vein responsibility is also personal. Therefore the position of the head of the organization or unit and his decisions instantly determine the position of the command unit that assists him and are taken as strict, binding orders. It follows that the position of the IDF in government discussions will always be the position of the chief of staff, and so on down the line of command.

The Commission comments on the culture of discourse in the IDF during the war, highlighting "the chief of staff's directive during the forum of senior officers, stipulating that military personnel must avoid voicing 'personal' opinions in places where the position of the military is called for."⁵ It seems that the chief of staff understood fully what the Commission did not, i.e., the absolute separation between: (1) the need to conduct discussions as part of the army's decision making processes and (2) the obligation to ultimately



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reach a decision and present it to the political echelon, assuming full responsibility for that decision as commander of the armed forces. The chief of staff may present a number of alternatives (though it his duty to recommend one of them) or on rare occasions present positions opposed to his own; however, this is always within the framework of his decision and preferences as the IDF's exclusive authority.

What does the Commission actually say in this context? In the paragraph quoted above, the Commission contends that the loyalty of members of the military echelon is to their profession and military duties, and they accept their obligation to the commander as part of their professional ethos. Herein lies the Commission's first mistake. In the world of military terms, obligation to the commander is not a professional ethos: it is a *legal duty*! The duty to obey (legal) commands of the command echelon applies to all army personnel and units. In the IDF, each soldier pledges to "unconditionally and without limitation take upon myself the bur-

den of discipline within the Israel Defense Forces, to obey all commands and instructions given by authorized commanders, and dedicate all of my strength and even sacrifice my life in order to defend the homeland and freedom of Israel." The idea that a professional duty exists above the duty to obey is groundless and indicates a total lack of understanding of the foundations of a mili-

tary organization. Shall the division commander who receives an order now check whether the order measures up to his own professional standard? Shall the staff officer given an order now examine it in light of his personal professional analysis?

The Commission report continues by encouraging IDF commanders and officers to insist on their positions within the organization. However, the Commission proceeds to make an astonishing pronouncement: if the opinions of officers are not accepted, it is their duty to protest to the higher echelons ("they must warn others and not shy away from a confrontation with their superiors"). Just that! In other words it is the duty of the commander to turn to higher bodies and protest. Now that same division, brigade, or battalion commander; that same staff commander is allowed to understand that his professional reasoning goes beyond his legal duty to obey and that the door is always open to appealing to higher echelons. This norm of behavior,⁶ if realized, will place the IDF in an intolerable situation.

The foundations of command in the IDF were established on the sound and universal foundations of war. The principle of command hierarchy is based on thousands of years of war and in the final analysis, on the cost/benefit ratio of the principle's application. True, it cannot be denied that there have been cases where commanders led their soldiers to crushing failures. The ultimate shield against faulty decisions by commanders and military leaders has not yet been invented, this despite the magical notion there are processes that if realized would improve the quality of decisions. It is important, however, to distinguish between discussions aimed at improving the knowledge and learning of decision makers, and deliberations where professional figures present their alternatives for action. This is a broad issue and lies beyond the scope of this article.

The state has given IDF commanders and the chief of staff an enormous amount of authority. The process of supervising the implementation of authority must be carried out in accordance with the command hierarchy. The authority to alter decisions of a given commander is always in the hands of his superior commander. The responsibility – in fact the duty – of a commander is to supervise his subordinates; if his supervision is not sufficient, he must replace them with other subordinates. *This is the art of military command.* Conversely, it is the duty of subordinates to implement the orders given to them and carry out the tasks assigned to them. In the event these tasks are contrary to the soldiers' professional conscience, it is their duty to request to be released of their duties and be willing to pay the price, and only then protest to the higher echelons. This principle is fundamental, and any deviation

from it would likely cause total chaos in the command apparatus.

Here the Commission has failed severely. It would have been fitting for the Winograd Commission to work towards setting a norm demanding commanders to take full responsibility for their actions, to resign, and be ready to pay the price if they are incapable of fulfilling orders given them, or of acting according to decisions in total opposition to their professional views. It was the Commission's obligation to invalidate the claim of "I opposed it in real time...but they didn't accept my opinion." The norm must be that the moment a commander decides *not* to be released of his duties, he becomes a full partner in the action, as if it was he who initiated it. The potency of the report's words and the weight ascribed to the report's content by the public and the military are liable to bring about a collapse of the norms of command that are so essential to the IDF. As such, it is the Winograd Commission that is liable to be the body that removes the keystone from the delicate structure of the army's authority and responsibility of command. It would be fitting if the contention of the Commission contained in its draft report would be removed from the final report so as to prevent a deepening of the crisis of command in the IDF.

Notes

- 1 The Winograd Commission, interim report, page 133 (Chapter 7, "Conclusions," article 120) in which Commission members state: "It is our impression that in those days the prime minister came to decision making meetings after the decisions had essentially been shaped and formulated" (all references are to the Hebrew transcript). Does the Commission expect that the prime minister would arrive at such critical government discussions without a definite position?



- 2 For example, on page 118 (Chapter 7, “Conclusions,” article 25) the Commission states: “We expect public leaders and the senior professional military echelon to have also examined whether a harsh response would indeed serve the entire range of interests of the state and the public they serve. Such an examination would have likely shown that based on existing knowledge and the evaluation of plausible scenarios, the dangers of an immediate harsh response would outweigh the advantages.” The risk analysis that was performed in hindsight reflects the Commission’s assessment regarding the strategic reality that was achieved versus the price paid for its achievement. There are different assessments of Israel’s overall strategic situation after the war; however, these cannot be measured, and therefore the members of the Commission have no relative advantage whatsoever in a determination of this sort.
- 3 Page 107 (Chapter 6, paragraph C, article 22). The professional echelon referred to is the military echelon, and the organization referred to is the IDF.
- 4 Gabriel Siboni, “Command in the IDF,” *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 4 (2007): 72.
- 5 The Winograd Commission, interim report, page 128 (Chapter 7, “Conclusions”, article 83).
- 6 Note, however, that this norm of behavior is illegal. Military-Justice Law, article 123, stipulates the penalties for not fulfilling the orders of a commander: “Any soldier who does not carry out an order given by a superior is subject to imprisonment of two years; if this offence is committed while the transgressor’s unit is in combat, he/she shall be liable to imprisonment of ten years.”