

Fighting a War in the Shadows

If one were to take stock of Israel Defense Forces Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, a number of qualities are evident.

On the one hand, there is his earnestness, his low-key manner, and his tendency to comb over every detail. On the other hand, there is his sober view of reality. He knows that we live in a world where shadow wars are the rule rather than the exception. It is a world where much is done yet little is known. As the top general in the military, Gantz is deserving of a fair share of credit for this body of work.

Unfortunately for him, he must accept the fact that the details will remain secret. In this era of instant gratification and media grandstanding, the IDF chief will have to reconcile with the fact that his most noteworthy achievements on all fronts will be known to a precious few individuals. According to foreign news reports, Israeli forces have attacked terror targets from Sudan to the Sinai Peninsula, from Judea and Samaria to Tehran.

In this dark, shadowy world, there is no chatter. Period. It matters little that the bulk of his work and the majority of his achievements are found there. It matters little that the successes scored here are extraordinary. Gantz can never claim the acknowledgment for these deeds.

Next month, Gantz will mark two years in the top job. Officially, he has one more year remaining on the job, as stipulated by recent legislation that limited a chief of staff's term in office to three years. The option to extend his term to a fourth year is still available. It's a good bet that he will indeed be given a fourth year, which thus gives us an opportunity to conduct a reckoning of his first two years at the helm.

On the positive side, Gantz could rightly boast of the quiet along the country's borders. In addition to the security front, which has never been quieter, there is also domestic quiet, particularly within the IDF. After the Boaz Harpaz scandal and the destructive intrigues that pitted Ehud Barak against Gabi Ashkenazi, normalcy has once again returned to the Kirya military headquarters.

Officers and their subordinates are mainly preoccupied with work while indulging in less mudslinging (they are human, after all). The defense minister and his chief of staff are working in harmony, though they are by no means friends. On the other hand, they are certainly not enemies. This is how it should be. Gantz is cognizant of his subordinate status relative to the civilian leadership, though he is adamant in demanding that his bosses fulfill their end of the bargain. That means conducting work diligently, orderly, and matter-of-factly. During the meeting in which Ehud Barak offered him the job of chief of staff, Gantz told the defense minister, "The army doesn't belong to me, but it doesn't belong to you either."

The calm is not just limited to relations at the top of the chain of command. The IDF is on a much cleaner, more salubrious path. Nobody could deny credit from Gantz's predecessor, Gabi Ashkenazi, for his role in restoring professionalism to the manner in which the military is run. His tenure, however, will forever be remembered for the shadow cast by the Harpaz affair and the war of intrigues between the generals and their respective associates.

Gantz is having none of that. Sure, he gives preference to his favorite commanders. He is particularly close to Military Intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi and Israel Air Force commander Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel. He also shares close ties with his new deputy, Maj. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot; the IDF Colleges commander, Maj. Gen. Yossi Baidatz; and IDF Spokesperson Brig. Gen. Yoav Mordechai. Yet even those who are not amongst his

inner circle would be hard-pressed to claim that Gantz plays favors or is unfair.

Perhaps the reason for this is that Gantz does not owe anything to anyone. He did the state a favor when he agreed to take the chief of staff position after the aborted nomination of Yoav Galant. As such, he is liberated from the burden of settling scores. Instead, he could focus on the task at hand.

In one of the summations drawn up following the internal probes into the prosecution of Operation Pillar of Defense, Gantz said: "If we could draw the appropriate conclusions without having the heavy cloud of an international or local commission of inquiry hovering over us, that's good enough." That may seem like an obvious statement, but the Second Lebanon War, which yielded the Winograd committee, and Operation Cast Lead, which brought us the Goldstone Report, left deep scars on the army. From this standpoint, an operation that ended without an investigative panel that called for heads to roll is good news for all.

One should not get the wrong impression, however. Despite the impressive calm that has blanketed the frontier with the Gaza Strip; and despite the significant deterrence that has been attained in Israel's showdown with the terrorist organizations; and despite the Egyptian-American coalition that supposedly will put a stop to the weapons smuggling, Pillar of Defense was not a real test for the IDF.

From the opening salvo to the end of the operation, there was never any doubt as to who had the advantage. The combination of exhaustive preparations, precise intelligence, and shrewd command on both the civilian and military levels yielded a relatively successful operation, though not on par with a real confrontation that awaits us either in Lebanon or Iran.

Gantz played a significant, though not exclusive, role in the operation. If one had to choose a specific area in which he

exerted the most influence, one could pinpoint the initial stages of the operation. The civilian leadership gave Gantz the green light to hit a list of targets that he saw fit, targets that he deemed were worthy of "removal" as part of the opening gambit. At the time, Hamas military commander Ahmed Jabari was still in hiding for fear that he would be liquidated, and a number of officers were urging the chief of staff to hit targets that were less attractive, but who were "available," so to speak, to get the operation underway. Gantz refused. There are those who said at the time (and still say to this day) that this is proof of his hesitancy. The bottom line, however, is that his patience paid off. Jabari made the mistake of emerging from hiding. He was spotted, and then eliminated.

Gantz matured into the job. He is still not enamored with the use of force, and he still prefers to avoid it as long as there are other alternatives available (particularly when it comes to Iran). When he needs to, however, he tries not to be "vegetarian" about the use of force. One could debate about the extent to which he discovered his carnivorous appetite in Gaza and how wise his decision was to pointlessly call up tens of thousands of army reservists. The bottom line, though, is that it is hard to disagree with the quiet in the southern part of Israel now. It was attained at a reasonable price, without entering into a military and international quagmire.

The chief of staff's real test—and, by extension, that of the organization that he commands—is the campaign that is being waged daily. It is a dark, secretive war that is meant to prevent, and at the same time prepare for, a large-scale, overt conflagration. At any moment, the Syrian front could suddenly ignite as a consequence of the downfall of Bashar Assad. The Lebanese theatre could flare up due to the transfer of advanced weaponry from Syria. The IDF is obligated to undertake painstaking preparations which necessitate nonstop monitoring, surveillance, and the exploration of new

frontiers. That means stationing command posts deep in enemy territory as well as upgrading cyberwarfare defenses, an area that has been given preferential status in terms of budget and manpower under Gantz's stewardship.

On Syria, the army has prepared a number of responses for any contingency, but there are still fundamental disputes with far-reaching consequences. These disagreements will have to be solved in real time if and when they come up. One of them is over the question of whether an aerial strike without a ground operation (much like Pillar of Defense) will suffice. Will it be possible to carry out a brief operation without wandering into difficult entanglements (unlike what happened during the Second Lebanon War)? Has the Israeli home front grown too comfortable with, and reliant upon, Iron Dome? Is it capable of withstanding an onslaught of 100,000 rockets courtesy of Hezbollah? Does Israel even have the international legitimacy necessary to embark on a large-scale war in Syria [or Iran]?

These questions will dictate Gantz's conduct as chief of staff as well as his dealings with the civilian leadership. Very soon, he will have to delve deep into this jungle, not only because there is a good chance that he will have a new defense minister to whom he must answer and with whom he will have to form a working relationship, but also because he will have to get an almost entirely new cabinet up to speed. There will be new faces in the government, and they will belong to those who will be called upon to approve massive IDF operations.

If there is one element that the IDF needs to take into account following these elections—with the exception of the fact that soldiers voted overwhelmingly in favor of either Yair Lapid or Naftali Bennett—it is that the public did not bother to wrack itself with existential security issues. Instead, it preferred to focus on day-to-day, domestic matters. On the surface, this may seem like good news, testament to the fact that Israel has finally become a normal country with (relatively) peaceful borders and an agenda that

is devoted primarily to local issues.

From the IDF's standpoint, however, given the geopolitical situation in the Middle East, there is big trouble looming. One need only observe the powder keg that threatens to explode in Egypt, the terrorism that is moving closer to the fence separating Israel and Syria on the Golan Heights, the accelerated pace of arms shipments in Lebanon, and the progress that is being made in the Iranian nuclear program. We haven't even broached the issue of the future of the Jordanian monarchy and the stability of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. This is enough to understand that drastic cuts in the security budget, which is a topic that will surely come up for discussion as coalition talks progress, are inherently disastrous from the point of view of the military chief.

It is reasonable to assume that Gantz will insist on receiving his portion of the pie. He will do whatever he is told, so long as the process is proper and transparent. He will offer his analysis of the ramifications of the cuts, but if they decide that Gantz has to cut, he will cut. The IDF has been working without a cogent, multi-year financial plan for over a year. This denies the army an opportunity to clearly spell out which direction it wishes to go, which projects it wants to invest in, and which priorities to promote. From the army's perspective, it is damaging, though it does leave Gantz with some flexibility ahead of the anticipated cuts. As such, Gantz would be wise to preempt budget cuts by presenting his own multi-year plan that will take into account the expected austerity measures in state funding but at the same time allow the army to make specific plans. Such an initiative would be a practical one, and it would spare Gantz and the IDF of the need to publicly castigate treasury officials who will surely want to "pull off a populist ploy at the expense of the IDF."

On a personal level, if Gantz were asked which chief of staff he wished to emulate, the most likely response would be Amnon Lipkin-Shahak. The two men were not particularly close (Gantz

was a protégé of Shaul Mofaz), but in the last two years Gantz saw in Shahak what many before him had seen—a low-key advisor, discrete and shrewd, courageous yet not prone to adventurism, undeterred by war yet always seeking peace.

Shahak personally bequeathed this legacy to Gantz. Three days before his passing, Shahak received the latter in his hospital room at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. Gantz wrote about this encounter in a newspaper column which appeared on the morning of Shahak's funeral. It was a very moving piece in which he recalled ending his visit by saying, "Have a successful journey."

What wasn't mentioned about this meeting, which took place just between the two of them (Shahak's wife, Tali, left the room and allowed the two men to talk privately for close to 90 minutes), is that Shahak told Gantz, "Don't give up for a moment. Don't give in. Be the voice of sanity, and always stand up for what you think is right. Do so with pride, and do it during the most harrowing moments."

The message was clear: Don't allow yourself to be enticed into military adventurism and don't give up hope for peace. The implication for the former was Iran and the latter piece of advice, the Palestinians.

On fateful issues, including the Iranian matter, Gantz hires staffers that will challenge his decisions and positions. Still, the challenges he faced in the past pale in comparison to those that await him in the future. Political instability, coupled with regional instability, will require the chief of staff to shoulder a greater share of the burden and to act even more responsibly than the job initially demands.

Relations with the Americans have been unsteady on the diplomatic level for the past few years. On the security level, however, the harmony has been quite impressive. This is the result of the close, personal ties that Barak and

Ashkenazi cultivated with their American counterparts, and which Gantz, a former military attache in Washington, D.C., has maintained. Under a new administration in Washington, which includes a defense secretary that is less enamored with Israel, the chief of staff will have to ensure on an almost daily basis that the vital strategic ties between the U.S. and the Jewish state—ranging from exchanges of intelligence and science to trade to joint projects with fateful ramifications—are not harmed.

As the gatekeeper, Gantz may find himself entangled in rows with the civilian leadership, though this may involve other matters as well. The issue of universal conscription and the drafting of ultra-Orthodox youths, an issue which was at the heart of the recent election campaign, could drag him into a political vortex. In this case, Gantz would be wise to offer a clearly defined, uncompromising position where he finds himself initiating rather than being led.

This could be a seminal event both on the national level as well as on the personal level for Gantz as chief of staff. More than any war or operation which may or may not unfold, more than any secret mission for which he can never claim credit, this is an issue in which Gantz could make “his own” change that seals his place in the history books.